In Search of a Homeland: Jewish-American Women Writers and their Struggle with Cultural Alienation

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ABSTRACT

IN SEARCH OF A HOMELAND: JEWISH-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR STRUGGLE WITH CULTURAL ALIENATION

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Northern Illinois University, 2022
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This study examines the lives and fictional works of five Jewish-American women writers of the twentieth century within the complex context of cultural alienation. Authors Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Marge Piercy are each featured in separate chapters that examine how personal experiences of estrangement weave through and influence their texts. As a result of this dissertation’s scrutiny, meaningful connections emerge between these diverse Jewish women authors and the transformation of painful struggles into profound journeys to seek belonging. Through their works’ literal and figurative pilgrimages to reach an ultimate homeland, all five writers creatively illustrate a recurring theme that explores the need to secure refuge within an intolerant society. Even with the authors’ varied Judaic backgrounds, these Jewish women writers consistently integrate similar quests for acceptance and efforts to heal fractured identities into their collective fiction. Because the five authors offer a unified literary approach to cultural desolation that expresses a desire to find sanctuary, this dissertation argues that a specific subgenre of fiction by Jewish women should be developed within American literature. At this time, such texts remain disconnected in the canon, where no framework exists to unite the crucial nature of Jewish women writers’ thematic artistry for the benefit of mainstream readers. However, a well-defined subgenre would resolve this omission to
recognize the extraordinary works written by Jewish women and their inventive imaginings of a homeland that shields against societal estrangement. Consequently, the five authors of this study as well as future Jewish-American women writers could achieve the acknowledgment and admiration that they deserve for authentically articulating the lived experience of Judaic womanhood.
IN SEARCH OF A HOMELAND: JEWISH-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR STRUGGLE WITH CULTURAL ALIENATION

BY

ALISA BURRIS
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father

Stan Spiegel.

Thank you for always encouraging me to grow as a writer.
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INTRODUCTION

Jewish women writers in America are outsiders on several complex levels. Within Judaism, a religion constructed by patriarchal principles, their participation often becomes marginalized, or worse, denied. As authors who reflect a Jewish imagination and lived experience, they routinely disappear in favor of male representatives whose works epitomize the tensions between religious and Americanized identities. Even as writers of woman-oriented prose, their voices rarely gain widespread recognition because the literary canon elevates female authors who embody more generic ideas of womanhood. The dual forces that marginalize Jewish women concerning both their spirituality and their gender only cause further invisibility. Despite this evident mistreatment, Jewish women with published novels, short stories, and autobiographical fiction over the last hundred-plus years offer profound contributions to Judaism, American literature, and the culture itself. To appreciate their significant literary efforts as well as to fathom the complicated cultural and religious barriers they encounter, this project looks at how Jewish-American women writers transform adversity into memorable literature that deserves national recognition. More specifically, it concentrates on how Jewish-American women writers incorporate a common search for an all-encompassing homeland in opposition to their experienced estrangement. Such a framework exemplifies how these female authors navigate religious and societal isolation to find sanctuary in an antagonistic culture. Through the works of Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Marge Piercy, this examination of key Jewish-American women authors analyzes innovative interpretations of how
developing an authentic home defeats cultural desolation. Confronting the multi-faceted suppression that Jewish-American women must endure, these writers powerfully describe a wide array of journeys with the intent to assert genuine spaces of their own.

Like the complex nature of Jewish women writers in America, the background history that contextualizes their consistently alienated experiences comprises similar intricacies. No simplified definition of the subject currently exists. Differing scholarly viewpoints, as well as the evolution of women authors who identify with this religion, complicate Jewish-American literature’s general parameters. Broadly speaking, academics continue to disagree on what constitutes Jewish literature. This conflict rests at the heart of any in-depth perception of Jewish-American women writers and their extensive body of work. To parse the various deviations, a recognition of divergent perspectives provides valuable insight on the emergence of this mosaic. Michael P. Kramer\(^1\) outlines the multiple directions and often overlapping borders that compose unresolved concepts of Jewish literature. He describes how academics and authors alike, female and male, offer diverse rationales of this genre’s boundaries that range from culture-based and written in a Jewish language to Jewish characters and historical experience. An even more specialized argument looms that Jewish literature should be seen through the prism of worship or other precise ideals incorporating more mechanical characteristics of Judaism. However, Kramer disentangles all of the bewildering qualifiers to make a streamlined claim about how Jewish literature should be determined: “One need only be a writer of Jewish extraction, a member of the Jewish race” (Kramer 290). From this angle, Jewish literature represents a wide assortment of

\(^1\) Kramer’s 2001 article titled “Race, Literary History, and the ‘Jewish’ Question” examines a wide array of factors in an attempt to determine a comprehensive definition of Jewish literature.
philosophies. So no single mindset enjoys elevation above any other, supplying the literature with a rich array of interpretive possibilities.

In spite of this clarity, Kramer’s theory potentially introduces a separate series of issues that questions whether or not Judaism embodies a race. The notion that Jews should be characterized as a race of people adds to the perplexing complications of Jewish literature itself. Yet an open discussion of race, particularly concerning Jewish women, provides a deeper awareness of how these authors interact with America culture. Jessica Greenebaum explains how Jewish women are frequently forgotten under the umbrella of race and within the topic of sexist mistreatment. She argues for the application of intersectionality when considering Jewish womanhood. “The way we experience gender oppression differs based on our other identities of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and religion” (Greenebaum 42). By making this claim, Greenebaum establishes a troubling contrast with the way feminists and sociologists homogenize or, in some cases, disregard Jewish women’s experience of oppression altogether. Part of the problem centers on the oversimplified concept that Jewish women belong to more privileged classes than other groups, thereby eliminating their experiences of systemic abuse. To Greenebaum, such an attitude reveals inherent hypocrisy and sexism because men of color can simultaneously struggle with racial persecution while also preserving certain entitlements because of their gender. The author states that rigid categorization should not be assigned to Jewish women because it only perpetuates oppression. Furthermore, Greenebaum challenges the notion that race solely refers to people with skin colors other than white. She declares “when we consider Jews ‘just’ white, we do not see them as having an ethnicity and culture” (Greenebaum

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2 Greenebaum’s 1999 article “Placing Jewish Women into the Intersectionality of Race, Class and Gender” is a sociological look at the oppression of women of Judaic descent.
49). Like Kramer, who acknowledges the complexities of Jewish literature, Greenebaum points to the complicated nature of whiteness and the importance of recognizing its cultural nuances. Jean Ait Belkhir, Johnnella E. Butler, and Lenus Jack, Jr. agree with Greenebaum’s argument that inflexible classifications are not a helpful way to understand intersectionality as it relates to the Jewish people. They feel that Jews do not exist in “identity boxes,” where they fit into a certain category on one day and then epitomize Judaism the next. To clarify their point further, the authors claim: “Our self-expression is a weave of identifications, one point of view influencing and blending into the other. The reality of our lives, our speech and our thoughts transcend categorical separations” (Belkhir, Butler, and Jack 5).3 All of these academic thinkers demonstrate the complexities of understanding Jewish identity, which encompasses numerous dimensions.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, Greenebaum insists Jews must also be aware that their minority status can be hidden while people of color lack the same advantage. Still, this apparent societal benefit does not excuse the overwhelming mistreatment of Jews in general, especially the elderly and women, which each represents most of the nation’s impoverished Jewish population. Greenebaum continues by stating the asset of seemingly white skin should never excuse anti-Semitism either. In the end, she concludes that feminists and the American culture itself must not merge Jewish women into a general category of socially immune whiteness. She argues that society as a whole ought to “grasp how anti-Semitism, classism, and even racism interlock with sexism to materialize a particular experience for Jewish women”

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3 Belkhir, Butler, and Jack Jr.'s 1999 article “Introduction: Race, Gender & Class from a Jewish Perspective” explains the complicated nature of Judaic identity and its multicultural facets.
(Greenebaum 58). With this assessment, Greenebaum communicates that Jewish women face a cumbersome form of prejudice existing both within their own gender and outside of it as well.

The notion that Jews generally occupy an outsider position dates back to the early years of the twentieth century when immigrants first arrived on America’s shores in large numbers. At this time, the nation shifted from an established nineteenth-century mentality of embracing people from far off lands to an adherence to new laws with fixed restrictions. Between 1921 and 1924, legislation portrayed Jews and other ethnicities as endangering the American population with communism and socialism in addition to an abundance of cultural problems. To respond to this panic, the government promoted a campaign of Americanization designed to absorb immigrants and mute their ideologies, instilling loyalty to the United States alone. As a result, Delia Caparoso Konzett observes that America deliberately disparaged Old World values in favor of an immovable patriotism, which showed no tolerance for any other civilizations.

“Linguistic homogeneity thus became the ultimate goal of the reform and Americanization movements, developing into the single most important aspect of assimilationist ideology and, in the case of white minorities, displacing the question of race and ethnicity” (Konzett 603). By refusing to recognize the diverse languages that crossed into America from European countries, the mainstream culture severely punished Jewish immigrants who were discouraged from maintaining pride in their heritage.

Couched in an ostensible attempt to help new arrivals adjust to America, this foundation of cultural bigotry has profoundly affected Judaic literature. Even generations later, Jewish-

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4 Konzett’s 1997 article “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yezierska’s Hungry Hearts” examines the repudiation of diverse cultures during the late nineteenth century’s mass immigration. She specifically analyzes this period in the context of Yezierska’s collection of short stories titled *Hungry Hearts*.
American writers continue to battle issues of religious character. According to Victoria Aarons, forced assimilation generated a disconnection from Judaism for writers after World War II. The process succeeded in Americanizing acclaimed authors, which include Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth.\(^5\) Aarons implies the seamless transition of these writers into the predominant American culture acts as a form of estrangement from Judaism. She writes: “Because the Jews assimilated so quickly (unlike other minority groups still pursuing their rights and fashioning their American identities), Jewish identity has become complex enough to force itself upon the design of American fiction” (Aarons 380).\(^6\) In other words, the government’s heavy-handed approach achieved its objective by indoctrinating Jewish immigrants. Yet that feat did not completely extinguish Judaic culture as evidenced by the resulting literature, which as Aarons continues, grapples with how to be faithful to Judaism in the United States. She asks: “Can one remain a Jew in a secular ‘melting pot’ and still feel at home there, still maintain a posture of economic and social success? This is the essential focus for contemporary Jewish-American writers” (Aarons 381). Such internal wrestling, a quality often reflected in Jewish literature, leads Aarons to tackle the same issues as Kramer, where she determines similar conclusions. Because of the complexities intrinsic to maintaining a Jewish identity in a conformist culture, a unified definition of Judaic literature is not feasible.

In fact, Aarons raises the same sort of questions Kramer presents, which involve the complicated facets of Judaism that range from the political to birth status to character. These

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\(^5\) It is worth noting that none of the Americanized Jewish authors of prominence are women. This fact further underlines the invisibility of Jewish-American women writers within the literary canon.

\(^6\) Aarons’s 1987 article “The Outsider within: Women in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction” ponders the intricate alienation Jewish women writers endure in their embodiment of otherness within the dual realm of American and Judaic cultures.
relevant attributes are difficult to delineate or even prioritize, making it impossible to simplify Jewish identity. Aarons explains this challenge by pointing out how swiftly Judaism consolidated into American culture as a result of the forced assimilation more than a century ago. Because of this mandatory process, Dalia Kandiyoti argues that the notion of an authentic Judaism in America rings false. She claims: “U.S. Jewishness is an American invention that has no prior existence and bears all the manifestations of an identity invented to conform to predominant U.S. social ideologies, based on competing and mutually exclusive identities” (Kandiyoti 50). To be sure, Kandiyoti’s observation demonstrates the historical and cultural conflicts that further complicate Judaism’s integrity within a society determined to dilute it because of systemic prejudice. Therefore, the effort to extract Jewishness from the American equation, to view it purely on its own terms, poses significant problems.

After establishing the convoluted nature of Jewish identity that complicates ethnic literature overall, Aarons narrows down the discussion even more to examine women writers of this genre. She establishes how matters become even more complex for women authors who write about Jewish themes. According to Aarons, male writers of Jewish descent such as Malamud and Bellow have smoothly coalesced their fiction with America’s literary norms. However, these notable authors’ counterparts consistently experience less success. Aarons argues that characters developed by Jewish-American women writers “find themselves paradoxically alienated from and drawn to a heritage from which they are excluded, and yet in which they play an important function – the silent foil of a male-dominated tradition. This paradox of

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7 Kandiyoti’s 2012 article “What Is the ‘Jewish’ in ‘Jewish Literature’?” adds support to other analyses mentioned thus far, which contemplate the complexities of Judaic identity and its complicated realities as reflected in literary texts.
simultaneous exclusion and inclusion results in the fragmentation of identity” (Aarons 393). In Aaron’s view, Jewish women authors must maneuver around a greater disconnectedness than men who generate similar stories of ethnicity. These women writers are further entrenched as outsiders, suffering greater estrangement both in American culture and within the Judaic practice itself.

This complex, multi-layered notion of societal estrangement poignantly comes to life in so many of the works by Jewish-American women. Janet Handler Burstein reinforces the concept that develops from Aaron’s insights, enhancing this notion with even more precise detail in the context of postmodern Jewish women writers. She describes how these authors are on a quest to find and understand their Judaic origins. Key revisitations to their own and to their relatives’ formative years function as a link to a personal sense of self, one that has been severed because of alienation from the dominant culture. Through concrete explorations of places now lost or forgotten, the authors restore connections to the past that make them feel whole in a segregated world. Burstein states: “Taken together as elements in a continuing discourse, they suggest the ways in which American Jewish women writers are reworking the discourse of home” (Burstein 801). Within these texts, Burstein claims restoring the ethnic space directly relates to a remembrance of the exiled European refuge. Consequently, the writers gain a much deeper understanding of this significant deprivation alongside a profound attachment to their Judaic identity. In her conclusion, Burstein further clarifies that contemporary Jewish women authors revisit prior European eras “to reconnect with the homes that shaped them, and to return – enlightened, empowered, and reconciled to loss” (Burstein 822). Because Jewish-American

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8 Burstein’s 2001 article “Recalling Home: American Jewish Women Writers of the New Wave” focuses on how women writers of Judaic descent are drawn to memory and reshaping the refuges of their past.
women writers encounter complex levels of oppression and isolation in mainstream society, explorations of home offer the possibility of meaningful roots, a protective sense of belonging imaginatively conceived of in literature. These efforts to recreate Judaic home spaces demonstrate that Jewish women’s individual lives and experiences matter, especially in the broader American culture that seeks to destabilize as well as to discourage differences.

For greater insight on the rationale behind Jewish women writers’ imagined homelands, this dissertation considers the lack of belonging that immigrants of Judaic descent experienced when they arrived in America during the late nineteenth century. American society’s rigid demand that newcomers assimilate, essentially abandoning their own ethnic traditions to receive acceptance, provides a foundation for the cultural alienation that followed. Through this pressure to conform, which amounted to a forced compliance with the era’s dominant Anglo-Saxon standards, an unofficial and still unrecognized literary subgenre developed in response. The effects of such indifferent Americanization, with its deliberate disregard for diversity, unified the written expressions of Jewish women writers over a period of more than 125 years. These inventive authors incorporated the discrimination they endured to serve as an underlying factor in their search for metaphorical safe havens. Anzia Yezierska is a pioneering voice of this imaginative reaction to such injustice. At the close of the nineteenth century, Yezierska and her family emigrated from Eastern Europe, suffering extensive abuse from the new world they believed would welcome their entrance with immense opportunity. However, their idealized hopes of America as a significant improvement from their former home in an anti-Semitic Polish-Russian village were never fulfilled. Exiled to the Jewish ghettos of New York’s Lower East Side, Yezierska and her relatives struggled from extreme poverty and religious intolerance
for many years. Using this personal distress as her material, Yezierska eventually became one of the first Jewish women authors to represent the detrimental effects of America’s tendency to reject ethnic distinctions. Furthermore, she forged a fundamental framework for narratives focused on multi-generational estrangement and influenced the literary endeavors of numerous Jewish women writers to come.

With Yezierska’s autobiographical fiction as a basis for understanding the journey to secure belonging, this study proceeds to examine Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Marge Piercy within that specific context. Consequently, the interconnections of all five authors as Jewish women accomplishing unique yet thematically similar navigations demonstrates the ultimate achievement of emotional wholeness. Together, these writers provide a rich texture of diverse outlooks that complement each other in meaningful ways. These crucial facets include the adjacency of the authors’ lifetimes within the twentieth century, shared family backgrounds, similarities in social positions, corresponding educational levels, and intimate relationships to Judaism itself. The long-term hope of this project is to encourage considerable recognition of Jewish women writers so that their complex exploration of the search for belonging can be more widely appreciated within American literature. Thus, a subgenre might earn acknowledgment, formally uniting this depiction of Jewish-American womanhood distinguished in myriad contemporary works over a span of decades.

Indeed, each of the imaginative authors featured in this project addresses the isolating effects of an antagonistic culture. Like immigrant writers, who experience similar marginalization, these five Jewish-American women authors confront the anguish of such cultural repression. Their solution involves some interpretation of a journey to find refuge.
Whether the targeted destination openly welcomes diverse ethnicities, develops more socially engaged communities, incorporates those who exist on the margins, elevates Judaic awareness and appreciation, or a generous combination of all these visions, the homeland itself exemplifies every facet of earnest, warmhearted affirmation. The expeditions which these writers’ protagonists embark upon represent individual quests for an enriching comprehension, a nurturing space largely nonexistent in reality. Implications of a better world exist within each of these inventive fictions. What’s more, the vision of an escape from estrangement in pursuit of a supportive community repeats itself as a central and quite inspiring thread that synthesizes these artful narratives. Yet the works, so thoughtfully linked together in their similar journeys, remain marginal at best when regarded within the comprehensive framework of Jewish-American literature. This project argues that more attention should be given to this consistent and well-developed theme of homelands that Jewish women writers explore. The idea of a homeland, an eminent destination that embodies acceptance, operates as the concrete realization of cultural connection. What’s more, this imagined place is distinguished by its readiness to embrace the emerging self of Jewish-American womanhood.

In addition to shining a light on the homeland motif and its complex layers of meaning, this project specifically underscores the cultural importance of Jewish-American women authors. On a consistent basis, the argument is presented for these writers to obtain mainstream acknowledgment, where their literary excellence can be more fully appreciated. The theme of home, a welcoming place of approval, extends beyond the written word into an equitable determination of where these exceptional Jewish women authors should stand as artists. This means the examination of homelands stands for more than the fictional journeys embodied
within these writers’ work. It is a complex metaphor that epitomizes the authors themselves as they individually seek recognition in their separate authenticities. This crucial aspect of the figurative notion of homelands occupies a significant part of this dissertation in the analysis of these Jewish women authors’ fictional/autobiographical writings of and their legitimate voices in American literature.

For a more in-depth appreciation of the metaphorical relationship of homelands to estrangement, one must understand the intricate association of sanctuary with Israel. Because this nation symbolically encapsulates refuge for people of Judaic ancestry, Israel represents the ultimate safe haven for Jews to obtain emotional as well as spiritual connectedness. Therefore, the actual term “homeland” offers a complexity that extends beyond this physical country and its predominantly Jewish population. Despite the emblematic nature of Israel as a protector of and shelter for Judaism, its relevance does not translate to the authors’ various versions of a sanctuary from societal alienation. Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Moshe Davis explain this phenomenon, which exists as a considerable reality in the entirety of Jewish-American literature. They discuss Israel’s absence particularly since the 1940s when authors of Judaic descent gained the most influence within literary circles. Furthermore, their theories aptly explain the pertinence of Israel to the Jewish women writers explored within this project. While these five authors continually probe the concept of a safe haven as an indirect allusion to the holy land, Israel itself never figures into their works, existing more as an image of emotional recognition than a concrete location.

From an historical perspective, Rosenfeld and Davis clarify that the image of America as a land of great promise evolved at the same time as Zionist leaders urged Eastern European Jews
to consider emigrating to Palestine. In the end, America won this competition because it offered “the aura of limitless opportunity” and “had the clear edge over the poor, arid, ancestral homeland in the Middle East” (Rosenfeld and Davis 114). Since so many European immigrants selected America for their future, Jewish literature developed over a span of generations with the United States in mind as an actual homeland. Yet this decision, intrinsic to Jewish-American culture, contributes to the fractured and convoluted identity that Jews living in the United States continue to contend with today. Although Israel contains the most concentrated Jewish population, it is frequently overlooked as a potential home to American Jews. Indeed, Rosenfeld and Davis argue:

Like the great majority of American Jews, most American Jewish writers identify as Americans, and never so much so as when they encounter an "otherness" that puts that identity into question. With respect to facing Israel and Israelis - a state and a people that are both kindred and perplexingly "other" - the challenge is likely to be even more difficult, for in such instances the Jewish as well as the American identity of American Jews is called into question. (Rosenfeld and Davis 122)

Just like Kramer and Aarons, who both wrestle with how to define Jewish-American identity when such a dizzying array of characteristics prevail, Rosenfeld and Davis prove Israel’s presence offers another layer to analyze further. For my project, I will use the helpful analysis by Rosenfeld and Davis as one of many sources that shape the context of homeland in Jewish-American literature, particularly in the writings of women authors. Furthermore, this dissertation will focus on how critical aspects of homeland, from the various angles previously described, weave through the five above-mentioned Jewish women writers’ work in meaningful ways that

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9 Rosenfeld and Davis’s 1997 article “Promised Land(s): Zion, American and American Jewish Writers” looks at the unmistakable deficiency of references to Israel in Jewish-American literature. The authors express regret that the Jewish state does not figure into contemporary works by authors aligned with Judaism.
clarify as well as enhance Jewish-American womanhood.

In addition to the symbolic homeland that resolves alienation and unifies the fiction of all five Jewish authors in this study, each writer also offers a wide range of personal experience in relation to intricate aspects of Judaism. From immigrant perspectives to impassioned yet critical portrayals of Jewishness to subtle avoidances of Judaic identification altogether, the women writers in this assemblage supply a fascinating array of viewpoints that enrich as well as challenge the genre. With a focus on works written during the twentieth century, the Jewish women authors provide a powerful framework for examining cultural estrangement in America that highlights issues at the complex intersection of womanhood, race, class, and Judaism.

This study begins with Anzia Yezierska, one of the first Jewish women voices to articulate American culture’s ethnic cruelty, and examines her substantial body of autobiographical fiction. Born roughly in 1880 (though her daughter claims the exact year is 1883), Yezierska and her family emigrated to America about ten years later from the Russian-Polish village of Plotsk. Because of this timeline, Yezierska offers firsthand knowledge of America’s coercive attitude toward the assimilation of Jewish immigrants. Indeed, her fiction reflects this harsh reality, providing a window to the deplorable conditions European Jews endured on the Lower East Side of New York City. Furthermore, she vehemently advocates for a greater understanding of the cultural displacement inflicted on Jewish immigrants. Many of her stories scrutinize how government social workers imposed American ideals on new arrivals. This deliberate effort attempted to diminish immigrants’ Judaic values in order to demand a nationalistic acquiescence without any respect for obvious cultural differences. Ellyn Lem observes that Yezierska’s writings critically inspect the impoverished, anti-Semitic world this
immigrant Jewish author experienced upon settling in America. Lem states that most of Yezierska’s fiction “could not be fully captured without the voices of those people who had no other ‘home’” (Lem 71). In essence, Yezierska represents the perspective of newcomers from another culture who must make a fresh start within an unfriendly, unfamiliar society. Ron Ebest builds on Lem’s claim to demonstrate how Yezierska’s work highlights America’s blatant mistreatment of Jewish immigrants:

…Yezierska’s depictions of the lower East Side were much different from those of other periodical writers. This is because, unlike the others, Yezierska never used the ghetto as a metaphor for Jewish personality. Instead her representations of the tenements revealed a subtler purpose. In many of her short stories, Yezierska suggested a causal relationship between American indifference and sweatshop labor. (Ebest 112)

Indeed, Yezierska challenges the prejudice inflicted on Jews living in ghetto conditions and barely making sustainable wages as sweatshop workers. She argues that America’s apathy, not flawed characteristics in Jewish immigrants, built this problematic environment. Her stories illustrate that Jews were the victims of an American system that actively discriminated against their cultural practices. Christopher N. Okonkwo reinforces Ebest’s argument by stating that “Yezierska’s ultimate message is that society should not attempt to mandate repression of authentic difference” (Okonkwo 144). Yezierska serves as a defender of diversity, particularly

10 Lem’s 1995 article “A Voice out of the Fishbowl: Yezierska’s Argument for Seeing the Slum from Within” describes the desolate immigrant experience that this author’s fiction explores. In this piece, Lem looks at a number of Yezierska’s novels and contrasts them with Stephen Crane’s more polished portrait of a ghetto existence in his 1893 novella Maggie: A Girl of the Streets.

11 Ebest’s 2000 article “Anzia Yezierska and the Popular Periodical Debate over the Jews” looks at the complexities of the author’s reception as a literary voice in America. He discusses the harsh criticisms of her often raw narratives and argues that their lack of polish is deliberate to highlight Jewish immigrant perspectives. To Ebest, Yezierska’s work formulates an argument to inspire key changes in the way that American culture treats marginalized ethnicities.

12 Okonkwo’s 2000 article titled “Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress: Anzia Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements” offers a detailed analysis of the author’s most important message. He claims Yezierska argues that
campaigning for the acceptance of Jewish immigrants within America’s borders. Through the lens of *Hungry Hearts & Other Stories* (1920) and *Bread Givers* (1925), two of Yezierska’s most celebrated literary accomplishments, this project demonstrates how the author explores America’s systemic exclusion of Judaic identity. Furthermore, this chapter will demonstrate Yezierska’s emotional search for acceptance and achievement in a culture that consistently, across multiple administrative agencies of the government, rejected her heritage.

To complement Yezierska, the second chapter explores Dorothy Parker, a writer whose complicated religious identity dramatically contrasts with the previous author. While both writers are contemporaries, their interactions with Judaism and social class do not share any resemblance to each other. Born Dorothy Rothschild to a Jewish father and a Scottish mother, Parker deliberately concealed her religious ancestry for most of her life. Furthermore, she avoided discussions of her childhood on the Upper West Side of New York City, a community of great affluence. At the age of five, Parker endured her mother’s death and this loss devastated the future author. She then struggled with her father’s second wife who adhered to strict Roman Catholic principles and sent her to schools that exemplified this spiritual philosophy. Though technically not considered Jewish because of her biological mother’s Christianity, Parker never felt comfortable while attending Catholic schools. Toward the end of her life, Parker characterized herself as “just a little Jewish girl trying to be cute.”

Such a statement contradicts any society does not possess the right to oppress or demean other cultures. To illustrate Yezierska’s passionate dissension against homogenizing a nation, Okonkwo examines the author’s novel *Salome of the Tenements* in this specific context.

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13 Several references to this apparent quote by Parker exist with minimal context. For the most detail, see *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?* by Marion Meade. In this book, Meade discusses how Parker looked back on her life and summed up her identity with this bitter humor.
her Christian upbringing and reveals the heart of her personal isolation. Indeed, Parker still identified more with the Jewish religion she never closely examined than the Christian culture imposed on her as a child. Her short stories constantly probe aspects of the outsider in society. Although never writing directly about Judaism, Parker’s fiction often embodies alienation through damaged womanhood as well as racial injustice, which both illustrates and symbolizes her own battles with cultural estrangement. Even though minimal scholarship exists on Parker’s relationship to Judaism via her writings, great potential exists in investigating her fiction through this framework, proving the author’s ultimate desire to feel at home with a fractured self. Furthermore, Parker offers a diverse facet of Jewish-American womanhood worthy of exploration. By carefully reading her complete collection of short stories, this project demonstrates Parker’s view that repressed ethnicities deserve to find cultural sanctuary and ultimate acceptance.

To follow Parker’s advocacy for the embrace of diverse ethnicities, Grace Paley and her short stories are the third chapter’s focus. Paley complements as well as complicates Yezierska and Parker on several fronts. Although Paley expressed strong criticisms of Yezierska’s writing style, she still built on the immigrant foundation developed so passionately by her predecessor. In the process, Paley enhances elements of Yezierska’s commitment to social justice, ushering activism into the postmodern era. Also, similar to Parker, Paley makes everyday life accessible with stories about forgotten or overlooked women. Unlike Parker, though, Paley thrusts Jewish womanhood directly into the spotlight, addressing concerns about Judaic identity with optimism, humor, and undaunted honesty. Through her prominent heroine Faith Darwin, the protagonist in eight of Paley’s short stories, this author offers key insights on contemporary lived experience of
Jewish women. Dena Mandel observes that Faith embodies Paley’s hopeful concept of Jewish womanhood in America:

…we find that Faith Darwin, like Paley herself, is the product of an urban environment and the offspring of Jewish immigrant parents, who raised their daughter upon the liberalism and Zionism of the 1920s, the inspirational socialism of the 1930s, and the dreams of American prosperity and happiness in the 1940s. (Mandel 86)

Paley’s portrait of Faith evolves from a secular world that has become more industrialized and distant, where the individual lives of ordinary yet culturally ostracized people come together to form community and, essentially, unity. Victoria Aarons notes that Paley as well as Cynthia Ozick belong to a group of modern Jewish women writers who recognize “the outsider position in both American culture and Judaism” (Aarons 380). In addition to Faith Darwin, Paley delineates other Jewish women characters who prove again and again that they are more resilient in a changing, unsympathetic social structure than men, powerfully able to survive and to adapt when confronted by difficult conditions. Specifically examining Paley’s work in a subsequent article, Aarons claims in a later article that the author “arms her characters with an articulate resolve to assert for themselves a place and a voice” (Aarons 25). This observation implies Paley’s characters must negotiate with alienation, mutually fighting for representation so as to build a community of their own. By examining Paley’s literary masterpiece *The Little Disturbances of Man: Stories of Men and Women in Love* (1956) as well as another collection of her acclaimed stories, this project analyzes the author’s portrait of how Jewish-American

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14 Mandel’s 1983 article titled “Keeping Up With Faith: Grace Paley’s Sturdy American Jewess” provides an in-depth profile of the author’s most recognized and celebrated protagonist Grace Darwin. In her article, she discusses how the eight short stories about Faith offer important insight about Paley’s own outlook, even while feeling anger over the cultural oppression of Judaic values.

15 See Aarons’s 1990 article “Talking Lives: Storytelling and Renewal in Grace Paley's Short Fiction.”
womanhood secures a shared space amid urban indifference and, at times, cultural cruelty.

A relevant expansion of Paley’s feminist elevation of community to combat estrangement, the fourth chapter explores Cynthia Ozick. As the most religious of the five Jewish women writers studied, her work shares common thematic threads with Paley’s stories in that she examines everyday lives with a Jewish focus. Furthermore, Ozick even offers a more religious equivalent to Faith Darwin in Ruth Puttermesser, the protagonist of five of Ozick’s short stories and the heroine of one of her most celebrated novels. This author also depicts Jewish individuals on the margins of society with unique complexities that force them to struggle in isolation. Ellen Serlen Uffen offers a fitting description of Ozick’s characters:

They are people who have come from somewhere else, another country or another city, another philosophical, even another chronological time, bearing with them the ideals and beliefs of that other setting, They are freighted with differences. They are set apart from the new place and, as such, misplaced, outsiders. (Uffen 53)\(^{16}\)

Like Paley, Ozick zeroes in on the Jewish outsider. Janet L. Cooper observes that Ozick’s characters “are struggling against the continual pressure of being Jewish in a hostile Christian environment” (Cooper 181). The alienation that derives from existing on the periphery of society comes across as a continual theme in Ozick’s work. However, the significant twist in her fiction involves an integration of Judaic texts, spiritual philosophy, and fantastical elements that relate to more obscure aspects of the Jewish faith. This intellectual component makes her writing less approachable with its specialized insights on Judaic tradition. Yet such an ambitious

\(^{16}\) Uffen’s 1987 article titled “The Levity of Cynthia Ozick” offers an overall context in which to examine the body of this author’s work. With the appearance of humor in Ozick’s overall application of magical realism, Uffen discusses how this author assigns fantastical abilities to her characters. The purpose of such inhuman powers is for Ozick’s creations to escape a world indifferent to Judaic traditions in order to perform God’s work.
incorporation of Jewish thought also enriches her prose, thereby adding a distinctive element that sets her narratives apart. In fact, Cooper adds that “it is virtually impossible to read one of Ozick’s texts without thinking a great deal about Jewish American identity” (Cooper 181). Like Yezierska and Paley, Ozick’s fiction looks at the experience of asserting a Jewish voice in a world that continually discourages such cultural diversity. In addition, Ozick mixes a fascinating form of feminism into her fiction. Ruth Bienstock Anolik notes: “In Ozick's formulation, the feminist project is not to change social and cultural paradigms, but simply to allow women to enter the structures as they are” (Anolik 38). As a traditional Jew drawn to a more conservative mindset, Ozick respects the Judaic structure in place yet she still aspires to depict Jewish womanhood with feminist implications, which adds another layer of complexity to her work. Indeed, Ozick explores complicated Judaic journeys for her characters in a quest for cultural acceptance while steadfastly integrating a love for Jewish principles.

Moving from the religious realm to more spiritual ideas, the fifth chapter features Marge Piercy’s narrative interpretation of finding acceptance within a desolate world. Piercy’s fiction gradually broadens from a strict, socially conscious science fiction-utopian focus to spiritually-centered plots of Jewish womanhood. As a consequence of this complex expansion, she represents a fascinating mixture of the four previous Jewish-American women authors. Like Yezierska and Paley, Piercy writes about the cultural aspects of Judaic womanhood.

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17 Cooper’s 2000 article “Triangles of History and the Slippery Slope of Jewish American Identity in Two Stories by Cynthia Ozick” looks quite critically at the author’s work. In fact, Cooper discusses the lack of clarity that she often detects in Ozick’s comprehensive message because of the density of this author’s writing style. However, Cooper argues that two of Ozick’s short stories are a model of the effort to determine Judaic identity.

18 Anolik’s 2000 article titled “Reviving the Golem: Cultural Negotiations in Ozick’s The Puttermesser Papers and Piercy’s He, She and It” discusses how two Jewish women writers confront their dual oppression by America and Judaism itself. Specific to Ozick, Anolik explains that this author reconfigures the golem, a divine figure of Judaic folklore, as a form of empowerment to resolve her cultural estrangement.
Simultaneously, she resembles Ozick as her work grows to include religious explorations of Jewish experience. Yet Piercy’s early fiction shares a greater affinity with Parker’s because she does not reference Judaism or divulge any aspect of her own Jewish identity within these writings. As Piercy’s fiction evolves, she intertwines the pursuit of a homeland more openly into her work. Similar to Parker, however, scant scholarship exists on the Judaic subject matter in Piercy’s novels. Her poems, many of which respond to Hebrew blessings, and the feminist ideas that often circulate in her fiction receive greater academic attention. Yet Piercy’s novels are significant in their sophisticated development of the search for a homeland in the midst of cultural fragmentation. This chapter integrates the notion of sanctuary with her awareness of Judaic traditions and an appreciation of identity as it pertains to Jewish-American womanhood.

All five of the selected authors taken together provide a profound landscape of modern Judaic authorship on womanhood and the pursuit to find sanctuary from cultural alienation. Indeed, these writers connect as well as contrast within an intricate texture of imaginative portrayals that showcases Jewish women’s lived experience in the search for fundamental belonging. The diverse pathways each author takes on these emblematic journeys to a homeland are crucial factors at the center of this study. With its enriching complexities in mind, the collective importance of Jewish women writers and their creative answers to confronting layered estrangement must not be overlooked. Because of these essential voices, Jewish women living in America have an empathic cultural forum that comprehends their struggles through each of the highlighted works. Therefore, the authors responsible for providing such an important outlet deserve further attention from the reading public as well as exceptional recognition for these literary efforts. Their work identifies an intolerable oppression of Judaic womanhood that could
lead to meaningful changes in American society, where this pattern of cultural estrangement can be effectively addressed. To make such an impact, this dissertation serves to promote a substantial awareness of Jewish-American women writers’ endeavors so the appreciation of their art transcends academic acknowledgment alone. Indeed, the works of Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Marge Piercy should be viewed within a separate and equally revered subgenre of American literature that can then be thoughtfully expanded upon with future Jewish women authors of their caliber. Because these writers continually weave symbolic navigations to an ideal homeland into their fiction, these creative representations deserve acknowledgement within American literature. Each author has contributed powerful stories about the authentic lives of Judaic womanhood, demonstrating a pattern of marginalization that enriches and informs America’s literary canon.
CHAPTER ONE:

ANZIA YEZIERSKA’S ENDURING QUEST TO FIND SANCTUARY IN AMERICA

Fierce, ambitious, and always direct, Anzia Yezierska yearned to achieve literary acceptance while obtaining a private refuge of her own in America. But this vision for herself, sometimes fueled by idealistic assumptions, failed to attain the professional and personal fulfillment she’d imagined during her lifetime. Emigrating to the United States from a small Russian-Polish village with her family at the end of the nineteenth century, Yezierska never quite transcended the outsider status that contributed to her lifelong feelings of intense loneliness and isolation. Yet this peripheral perspective enabled Yezierska to write meaningfully about the brutal treatment of Jewish immigrants in this new world as she witnessed the American government’s hardened intent to colonize her people. Furthermore, her semi-autobiographical novels and short stories offer crucial and artfully conceived insights into not only the Jewish immigrant experience in the United States during the Eastern European influx, but the underlying actions that distinctly revealed anti-Semitic oppression. Yezierska herself embodies the traumatic cultural separation and disenfranchisement that developed during this period of American history. From enduring impoverished conditions on New York’s Lower East Side to rising to sudden celebrityhood for her raw stories about the Jewish ghettos, Yezierska often found herself at odds with the entrenched patriarchal Judaic belief system and a materialistic universe that left her inherently empty and estranged. This complicated reality forced Yezierska to negotiate
unresolved layers of alienation for much of her adulthood. As a consequence, she struggled in her pursuit of genuine belonging, haunted by desolation, a continued misunderstanding of her work’s literary importance, and, fundamentally, an incessant rage at America’s systemic dismissal of Judaic values. However, Yezierska’s conflicts inspired an impressive body of work that ferociously advocates the rights of Jewish immigrants, particularly women, as they try to establish a new homeland in America’s foreign, often cruel mainstream society.

With a continual concern about finding an authentic space of her own in America, Yezierska shapes her novels and short stories to reflect an all-consuming quest for sanctuary. She conveys this perpetual theme through the eyes and in the raw language of Eastern European Jews. From Yezierska’s initial literary acclaim with “The Fat of the Land,” included in Edward J. O’Brien’s anthology *Best Short Stories of 1919*, to her 1950 semi-autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, the author’s major works follow Russian-Jewish women of all ages on their personal journeys to reach permanent safe havens within New York City. Expressing an eagerness to overcome dreadful poverty and displacement, Yezierska’s characters are single-minded in their desire to ascend from the unhygienic neglect of tenement life and obtain some form of reliable American security. In addition to the fierce resolve Yezierska’s heroines exhibit, they share certain key traits, including complicated natures, melodramatic tendencies, and intense, sometimes overwhelming emotions as they confront circumstances that are often intertwined with immense challenges. These protagonists must navigate around ingrained misogynistic treatment within their communities, even from family members at times, as well as the vast American society, which conveys little sympathy toward foreign-born, Jewish womanhood. Ellen Golub summarizes this recurring theme nicely by stating: “Yezierska’s
fiction is one of balked desires and lost homes’’ (Golub 57).1 Indeed, each heroine encounters this very journey, facing unforeseen obstacles and the constant threat of falling so far behind economically, where every penny counts for survival, as to be left homeless on New York’s indifferent streets. But the potential for such defeat does not stop each of Yezierska’s protagonists from pursuing her dream of the ultimate American security. Beginning with the initial departure from her origin of birth in the Old World, Yezierska’s main character finds herself determined to abandon New York’s Jewish ghettos for the chance to possess a clean, dependable shelter all her own within America. Based on details from Yezierska’s personal experiences, including the courageous risks she herself took in order to “make for myself a person,”2 this author boldly explores complex themes about the hunger of Russian Jews to assimilate into America’s supposed melting pot of opportunity.

Alongside this ache for a more financially and emotionally stable existence, Yezierska shows the extreme price of Americanization, where establishing a home often means compliance with horrendous mistreatment. She demonstrates the extent to which the immigrant population’s Jewish heritage and Old World values are not welcomed by America’s intolerant civilization. Instead, a more generic Christian, Anglo-Saxon mentality prevails, compelling Judaism to a

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1 Golub’s 1983 article titled “Eat Your Heart Out: The Fiction of Anzia Yezierska” looks at the author’s life and work in the context of food. Based on themes that revolve around an eagerness to belong as explored in Yezierska’s debut collection of stories Hungry Hearts (1920), Golub examines how craving and desire act as symbols of Jewish immigrants’ aspirations to make America their new home.

2 Yezierska uses this phrase frequently in her works to describe her determination to lift herself out of the Jewish ghettos, develop her mind, and escape a life of sweatshop jobs in factories that abuse their employees with extremely low pay, terrible working conditions, and overall anti-Semitic attitudes. This particular wording that reflects Yezierska’s desire is especially woven throughout her collection of short stories Hungry Hearts (1920), which launched her into Hollywood fame with the name “Sweatshop Cinderella,” and her most celebrated novel Bread Givers (1925). See Ellyn Lem’s 1995 article “A Voice out of the Fishbowl: Yezierska’s Argument for Seeing the Slum from Within” for fascinating analysis on the origins of Yezierska’s wording. According to Lem, Yezierska adapts the self-defining phrase from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1841 essay “Self-Reliance.”
secondary and much less respectable position. Yezierska’s work regularly confronts this binary school of thought, which, ironically, had been advanced by powerful reformers and social educators of her era, including influential pedagogue and clandestine love interest John Dewey. Seemingly unaware of the cultural implications, Dewey proposed that immigrants arriving in America should contribute their traditions to a master belief system for the country’s common good. This process would produce an ideological blend from multiple ethnicities to represent a cohesive nationalistic brand. Quite fittingly, Gay Wilentz observes the contradiction within such a philosophy, which, while claiming to embrace diverse world outlooks, served to suppress them in reality. “Implicit in his demand is an understanding of the superiority of a certain culture and a certain class that contrasts sharply with Dewey’s goal of an expansive American nationalism” (Wilentz xix). 3 Wilentz defines the hypocrisy that Yezierska continually challenges in her stories. Yezierska’s work critiques the misleading vision proposed by Dewey and others that only appears to champion divergent traditions. As a matter of fact, according to Yezierska, these thinkers who posed as progressives with a sincere concern for Jewish immigrants’ success, categorically viewed Judaic practice as inferior, quite subordinate to America’s mainstream Christian principles. Their indirectly prejudiced response helped to reinforce the poverty-stricken tenement communities assigned to Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Yezierska knew so intimately and with such vivid detail.

In the 1890s, when Yezierska had reached the approximate age of ten, she moved to New York with her parents and reportedly eight other siblings to escape the anti-Semitic Russian-

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3 See Wilentz’s 1995 Introduction to Yezierska’s novel Salome of the Tenements for more analysis of Dewey’s viewpoints on assimilating immigrants in America.
Polish village of Plotsk for a more promising future home in America. Sadly, the family transferred from one hopeless situation of bigotry in a ghetto community to another, where living conditions were abhorrent within the Lower East Side’s overcrowded, dirty, and neglected tenements. As Yezierska became a teenager, she refused to acquiesce to never-ending factory labor and domestic duties to support the family. But she needed to liberate herself from the patriarchal stranglehold within her Orthodox family before even attempting to conquer the prejudiced American culture. Her resolve to reject conventional expectations and find her own path resulted in instant alienation from her relatives, especially her traditional father, a scholar of the Torah. Years after leaving home at the age of seventeen to get the education she craved, eventually earning a degree from Columbia University’s Teachers College in 1905, Yezierska visited her family in triumph with the 1925 publication of her most famous novel *Bread Givers*. By this time, Yezierska had already been a published writer for an entire decade, earned a lucrative movie deal in 1920 from Samuel Goldwyn for her short story collection *Hungry Hearts*, which led to a short residence in Hollywood, and rose to celebrityhood with the media moniker “Sweatshop Cinderella.” Even with all of these impressive, once-in-a-lifetime accomplishments, Yezierska did not receive any praise or admiration from her father. On the contrary, he recited chauvinistic quotations from the Torah, informing her that the decision to separate from her people and lead a life on her own foreshadowed a miserable death. Furthermore, he claimed that because Yezierska chose to be alone, she had no real existence. At this point in her life, she had left two marriages and a child behind to concentrate on her writing, directly rebelling against her father’s will. In her autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Yezierska recounts this painful and stunning rebuke. “Each time I came to see him, he reminded
me that I was unmarried and attacked me for my godlessness” (Yezierska 217). Since she rejected the submissive role expected of her as a young Jewish woman, choosing to consider other avenues that America could offer instead, she faced the emotional abandonment of her father.

This unfortunate estrangement from a key parental figure, which profoundly affected her ability to feel welcome in the family home, deepened Yezierska’s position as an outsider, both in her life and in her work. Each piece of Yezierska’s fiction demonstrates her protagonist’s complicated hunger for acceptance, but from a dejected distance, with intricate threads that weave through the family unit and expand into an indifferent society reluctant to embrace foreign intruders. Wilentz observes that this phenomenon frequently occurs within the genre of Judaic literature:

Much of Jewish fiction worldwide has focused on the outsider status of the Jew; as with other "minority" literatures, Jewish immigrant fiction has also addressed the loss of culture in the attempt to assimilate. Often, the shocking irony is that no matter what one gives up, s/he still remains an outsider to the dominant culture. (Wilentz 38)⁴

The complex cultural alienation that Wilentz describes perfectly applies to Yezierska’s own predicament, which led to lifelong isolation and subsequent guilt due to her early literary successes. Although her family had come to America precisely for the options and freedoms the nation appeared to offer, Yezierska routinely experienced disapproval for her interest in the modern options that were available. According to Lisa Muir’s view, “Yezierska’s frustrations lay

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⁴ See Wilentz’s 1991 article “Cultural Mediation and the Immigrant’s Daughter: Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers” for more insights on Yezierska’s work and concerning the topic of Jewish immigrant literature.
in remaining an observer rather than a participant within the new American culture” (Muir 638). Because of the sexual discrimination intrinsic to Orthodox Judaism, Yezierska’s family, especially her father, expected her to be loyal to Old World customs, withstanding the temptations around her, even though she now lived in a more progressive society. But Yezierska chose to adopt her new homeland’s adventurous values, dismissing her father’s rigid demands to discover the various advantages beyond the Jewish ghetto.

In addition to such stern, sexist authority within the tenement apartment, Yezierska faced the substantial prejudice that American society instituted against Jewish immigrants, complicating her isolation. Wilentz aptly points out that Yezierska highlights the painful complexity of adjusting to a new culture as a Jewish woman from another land due to the oppression that flourishes uncontrolled at home. To expand upon this concept, Wilentz states: “Yezierska transforms her own paradoxical experiences as an immigrant daughter of America to expose us to the double bind of the Jewish woman, whose freedom from the rigid strictures of traditional Jewish culture left her rootless and thrust her into a hard and prejudiced world which kept her always a stranger” (Wilentz 34). Because of the restrictive, multi-layered alienation that Yezierska must navigate at every turn, where she cannot acquire support for her personal determination either inside or outside the home, she never quite finds her own niche and remains forever disconnected as a result. Lisa Muir concentrates this tragic dispossession even more by discussing how the family’s patriarch impeded his daughters’ ability to become integrated participants within their new homeland. Essentially, he ensured their detachment from the larger

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5 Muir’s 1997 article “Lady Liberty’s Colonization and Anzia Yezierska’s ‘Bread Givers’” specifically looks at the limitations imposed on Jewish women immigrants when seeking to make America their new home. Muir examines Yezierska’s autobiographical fiction in the context of the cultural oppression that newcomers routinely endured.
society through the built-in oppression of Judaic practice. According to Lisa Muir’s analysis, “as a fanatically religious man, Yezierska's father controlled and further colonized his daughters by retaining the luxury of decision-making once in America” (Muir 638). Instead of allowing his female offspring to explore the benefits of their adopted country, he made it impossible for them to adjust through his continued domination. Thus, the women in this household were locked in a stranglehold containing numerous layers designed to maintain authority and squelch individualized expression.

Based on the elaborate control mechanism at play, Yezierska had to maneuver around her tyrannical father and overcome the religiously-imposed estrangement from society at once. This stressful balance propelled her into the position of an outsider and an insider at once, where she faced isolating divisions within such a desolate existence except for her writing. Babbette Inglehart argues this grim reality provided Yezierska with special insights on the myriad levels of seclusion that complicate the lived experience of Jewish women immigrants in America. What’s more, Inglehart claims that Yezierska’s struggle makes her an important voice for this systemic mistreatment. “Anzia Yezierska writes from inside: she is both participant and witness, and it is in the combining of these points of view that her role of literary spokesman emerges” (Inglehart 2).6 As simultaneously inside and outside elaborate cultural repression, Yezierska occupies a complex function in her representation of first-generation Jewish immigrants’ adjustment to America’s looser structure while still balancing often transfixed family

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6 Inglehart’s 1975 article “Daughters of Loneliness: Anzia Yezierska and the Immigrant Woman Writer” provides an analysis of the author’s central themes. She also examines Yezierska’s work in relation to the personal struggles this author experienced in the author’s search for belonging.
expectations. The challenges imposed on women are even more complicated because of the unspoken sexism intrinsic to Judaism, specifically the Orthodox denomination.

To understand the powerful patriarchal forces within the Judaic culture that Yezierska opposed for her American independence, one must consider Old World principles, which explain the literal and figurative homeland she left behind. Before arriving on Ellis Island during the 1890s, the family lived in a shtetl named Plotsk, also known as a small, Jewish village located within Eastern Europe. Yezierska’s father devoted all of his time to the Torah and became a well-respected, though unpaid, Talmudic scholar, necessitating family members to rely heavily on the community’s generosity to cover much of their living expenses. While beholden to neighbors for support, Yezierska’s mother and older sisters also worked various jobs in the town to help provide for their large family. As Edith C. Weinthal indicates, women in the shtetl were viewed in a one-dimensional light, where their value exclusively existed in relation to the family unit and its needs, nothing more. “Shtetl women, whose very selves were defined by the men of the family, lived in constant subordination within a male-dominated society” (Weinthal 11). In other words, Jewish women were suppressed and denied the ability to develop as individuals. Forced into secondary roles, they concentrated on domestic maintenance so that the men could engage in more prominent endeavors of cultural influence. Unlike women and girls, who were given caretaking responsibilities of the younger siblings and money-earning tasks outside the home, men and boys could focus on religious studies during the day without any household duties to distract them. Therefore, they were socialized to think and develop intellectually,

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7 Weinthal’s 1994 article titled “The Image of the City in Yezierska’s ‘Bread Givers’” discusses the author’s complex portrait of American culture. In her piece, Weinthal also examines how Yezierska uses city imagery as a critique of how this nation diminishes the importance of domestic life.
progressing with an uninterrupted education. By contrast, girls were limited to learning the basics of Hebrew letters just to gain rudimentary literacy skills in Yiddish. From a societal perspective, they did not need further training because of their expected future subservience to the family unit alone.

While Yezierska and her relatives resided in Eastern Europe, where they unquestioningly followed the prescribed patriarchal norms, she escaped the rigidity of these gender roles as the family’s youngest member. Under the age of ten at the time, Yezierska enjoyed more freedom than her older siblings, especially her sisters, throughout these early years. However, her life drastically changed on a number of fronts when the family moved far from her birthplace to New York City. Not only did she need to adjust to a new culture, Yezierska had no choice except to accept a whole other identity. In the context of the Statue of Liberty and the idealistic message of acceptance to immigrant customs that this monument represents, Lisa Muir discusses Yezierska’s instant estrangement from her Judaic heritage upon entering America. She explains that when Yezierska’s family members arrived, they chose the surname of Mayer to mask their Jewish heritage and to blend into a foreign society that might pose potential anti-Semitic dangers. With this well-meaning decision, though, Yezierska lost a vital connection to her ancestry when she became Harriet “Hattie” Mayer. “Ethnicity erased with the change of name, Yezierska, like the Lady of the harbor, stood isolated, member of no culture. As Hattie Mayer, Yezierska was neither American nor Russian” (Muir 641). The seizure of Yezierska’s link to the traditions of her past inevitably generated an automatic alienation in her adjustment to this entirely new world.

Once she reached her teen years, Yezierska experienced the same fundamental limitations
as her older sisters, even though the Mayer family now lived in a much more modern society, establishing the estrangement to come. Although the home’s location had dramatically switched to New York’s Lower East Side, the expectations for women remained fixed within the Eastern European Judaic standards across several continents and thousands of miles away. Despite this new residence in America, the only liberties available to Jewish womanhood were instituted authorizations that had been incorporated into Old World observances for generations. The act of working and receiving payment for this labor counted as a specific and well-accepted license afforded to women in the Judaic culture. According to Alice Kessler-Harris, the ability for Jewish women immigrants to earn American money could be viewed as a mere transfer of their Eastern European permissions, where they actively interacted within the marketplace. For the family’s survival, women needed to secure jobs outside of the home, usually finding low-paying work at neighborhood sweatshops in the Lower East Side’s Jewish ghettos. However, as Kessler-Harris notes, women’s agency existed only to serve the family’s financial needs, not for their own growth or pleasure. She states in the Introduction to Bread Givers: “But at its extreme, when a woman’s autonomy involved the search for personal fulfillment, it became nothing short of revolutionary. It violated a basic tenet of Jewish family structure: that women were merely the servants of men, the extensions of their husbands” (Kessler-Harris xxv). This embedded attitude

8 Kessler-Harris is a crucial figure in the rediscovery of Yezierska’s contributions to literature written by Jewish women writers. While researching for her dissertation during the 1970s, she came across Yezierska’s works, which had gone out of print long before. Even though Yezierska had been a very popular author from the 1920s through the early 1930s, her novels and short stories were largely forgotten once the Great Depression dominated American culture. So Kessler-Harris devoted herself to finding a new publisher for Yezierska’s past publications. Because of her dedicated and long-term efforts, nearly all of Yezierska’s writings are available today. Furthermore, Kessler-Harris is the one scholar who provides further dimension to Yezierska, the woman, than other researchers because she interviewed the relatives and friends who knew this author best. Therefore, she offers a much more comprehensive portrait of Yezierska and her motivations throughout her mythologically blurred life. In Persea Books’ third edition of Bread Givers, Kessler-Harris provides an informative foreword, where she intricately details her efforts to persuade publishers to reprint Yezierska’s body of work. Then in the introduction, Kessler-Harris
presented a massive obstacle to Yezierska’s dreams of attaining an American education. Essentially, the principle forced her to choose between submitting to a subservient position within the Jewish community or following an individualized vision for her future.

Still a teenager, Yezierska made the difficult decision to reject the prescribed destiny of a young Jewish woman and leave her family home at the age of seventeen for an education. Defying her father’s commands, she rented a meager room for herself, labored long hours in a sweatshop by day, and attended night school classes in the evenings. At the core of Yezierska’s constant conflict with her father over this relentless desire to learn, to become someone, exists the reality that they both valued intellectual studies and scholarship. In the Introduction to Yezierska’s final work, her autobiography titled *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, W.H. Auden reflects on this tragic, almost hypocritical discord. He notes that the one person who understood Yezierska with the greatest depth actively discouraged her from a purpose he could relate to better than any other figure in her life. Merging a stream of consciousness style with concrete facts from Yezierska’s personal history, Auden muses about this troubled father/daughter relationship and how the randomness of gender played such a pivotal role in the pair’s continued antagonism:

His daughter, however, as she later realized, was more like him than either of them at the time could perceive. Had she been less like him, had she simply desired money and a good marriage, there would have been less friction between them but she, too, was seeking for a dedicated life of her own, which in his eyes was impious, for all vocations but one were for men only. (Auden 14)

As Auden observes, Yezierska shared a key similarity with her father: an intense yearning to shape her own path through the crucial awareness provided by ongoing education. Despite such a

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offers critical information to explain the Old World barriers Yezierska faced on her journey to becoming a vital voice for Jewish women immigrants and their complex experiences in America.
crucial resemblance, Yezierska’s father continually censured her determination to develop herself on an intellectual level, rather than to pursue marriage, children, and domestic duties. Auden explains the unconditional terms this family’s patriarch applied in his objection to Yezierska’s assertion for independence. Fusing cultural and religious values together into a strict household law, he dismissed Yezierska’s declaration of an existence beyond the family unit. Therefore, Yezierska’s father viewed her disobedience as not simply disrespectful to the culture, but as sacrilegious.

Indeed, such paternal rejection reveals the massive inequality and insurmountable sexism so firmly ingrained in the Old World Judaic practice that configured Yezierska’s ultimate alienation. Ann R. Shapiro remarks that Yezierska faced an immovable structure with oppression at its center in her venture for personal growth and accomplishment. “The intellectual world of the Jew could be inhabited only by men, who like Yezierska's own father might devote their lives to study while their own wives and children struggled with the everyday business of survival” (Shapiro 81). To Shapiro, if Yezierska had been born a male, she could have pursued her intensive desire for an education without opposition. Yet the unfortunate reality demonstrates that Yezierska’s womanhood denied her the benefit of this enlightenment. Instead, the unequivocal apparatus in place and severely enforced by her father thrust Yezierska in a no-win situation, which formed the foundation of her profound, lifelong isolation at every turn.

Due to gender alone, Yezierska endured misogynistic barriers intrinsic to traditional Judaism that complicated her ability to escape the ghetto unscathed and discover a more

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9 Shapiro’s 1996 article “The Ultimate Shaygets and the Fiction of Anzia Yezierska” scrutinizes this author’s work through the recurring theme of successive Jewish heroines who seek cultural acceptance through Gentile romances. Within this context, Shapiro draws conclusions about Yezierska’s own inability to find personal belonging.
gratifying existence. Yet she did not allow these hurdles, however painful, to hold her back, choosing fearless adventures into the unknown over conventional acquiescence. With her resourcefulness as well as an aggressive determination to connect with those possessing great influence, whom Yezierska frequently called the “higher ups,” she did succeed in rising from poverty to bypass the prescribed impediments of her Jewish immigrant womanhood. After earning a degree in domestic science to teach home economics in 1905, Yezierska took a significant step in leaving poverty behind to afford a modest, clean space of her own and out of the crowded Lower East Side tenements. But as Lisa Botshon points out, Yezierska did not enjoy this career and searched for other creative outlets, even as an actress at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Botshon observes that Yezierska refused to succumb to the cultural assumptions projected on young women of this era:

> The fact that Yezierska was still trying to discover what most interested her, and, needless to say, was still unmarried in her late twenties shows that she deviated quite a bit from her family's expectations (her sisters had married and had had children by this age), as well as from the general expectations of society at large. (Botshon 237)

Bold and daring, Yezierska wanted to explore nontraditional options to find her true calling, not follow in her older sisters’ submissive footsteps. While she resisted the pressures of marriage and children during her early adulthood, however, Yezierska briefly relented to conventional norms in her early thirties. She married twice, annulling the first union after just one day, and then committed herself to her second spouse, teacher and textbook writer Arnold Levitas, the next year. This final marriage produced her only child Louise, but the relationship with Levitas

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10 Botshon’s 2010 article titled “The New Woman of the Tenements: Anzia Yezierska’s ‘Salome’” examines this novel through the lens of the New Woman. In addition, Botshon provides a detailed biography of Yezierska to illustrate how the author’s views of ethnicity and feminism influenced this work of fiction.
fractured soon after their daughter’s birth as Yezierska felt the continual restraint of conjugal demands. For several years, Yezierska experienced great emotional havoc, where she moved between New York and San Francisco for positions as a teacher and as a social worker. These abrupt choices to relocate enabled Yezierska to flee from the domestic duties expected of her as she struggled to find genuine fulfillment.

Toward the end of this tumultuous period, Yezierska, once again, insisted on independence from patriarchal suppression, leaving her in a state of alienated instability. But during the process of reinventing herself, she reclaimed her given name of Anzia Yezierska and began to write fiction. With her usual determination, she organized her life precisely around the goal of publishing her work. By 1916, Yezierska divorced Levitas and regrettably relinquished five-year-old Louise to him and his mother so she could focus her energies on becoming an author. Because of her unusual choice, which demoted family responsibility in favor of a personal quest for accomplishment, scholars have routinely examined this pivotal moment among other uncommon characteristics that Yezierska embodied since her rediscovery in the 1970s. Some thinkers such as Leslie Fishbein reflect a cynical edge, characterizing Yezierska as “so driven by her desire to write that she abandoned tradition and the bonds of affection for her muse” (Fishbein 137). The implication is that Yezierska’s extraordinary need to write should

11 In Fishbein’s 1998 article “Anzia Yezierska: The Sweatshop Cinderella and the Invented Life,” she eviscerates the author on a number of levels, principally berating her for an innate marketing ability. While acknowledging her “untutored natural talent” (Fishbein 137), she continually accuses Yezierska of a profound misrepresentation of her life in order to achieve fame and public adoration. Fishbein’s criticism of Yezierska is relentless, scathing, and largely lacks any compassion. She characterizes Yezierska as a self-promoter who would shape herself in whatever form necessary to reach her goals, even presenting her final work Red Ribbon on a White Horse as an autobiography, which Fishbein claims it is not, to convince W.H. Auden to write the introduction. Fishbein focuses the majority of this article on attacking Yezierska’s last book and accuses the author of deceiving her audience by painting herself as a caring mother as well as more moral and righteous than actuality in her eventual disdain of Hollywood. According to Fishbein, Yezierska abandoned the film capital, in part, to impress her socialist friends at the Rand School in New York and because of her religious father’s disgust with what he viewed as a hedonistic, evil
be regarded as trivial in comparison to the warm social ties conventionally expected from women. Fishbein proceeds to censure Yezierska as a writer who exaggerated her experience while also misrepresenting her life and work in a self-promotional push for attention, which led to a confused identity that lacked religious values. Although Yezierska did exhibit an exceptional ability to gain the attention of prominent decisionmakers, where she skillfully marketed herself “as a Russian Jewish author who could display the exotic world of the ghetto to America's white middle class” (Botshon 233), Fishbein’s indictment unfairly minimizes this writer’s literary determination and resourcefulness. It also overlooks the focused diligence involved in succeeding as an author who constantly confronted religious, cultural, and gender-based obstacles.

Still, Fishbein’s final assessment of Yezierska’s life choices, which link the author’s ultimate isolation to a progressive split from interlinked cultures, offers some substance to contemplate despite its biased simplification. As a Jewish woman immigrant living in America, Yezierska never found personal contentment, partially because she had ideological differences with the misogynistic principles at the root of Judaic practice as well as the anti-Semitism and prejudice against the poor in the United States. Whether in a family unit, in an impassioned pursuit of publication, or in her last years of extreme loneliness, where she felt the most intense estrangement from both Judaism and the punishing class system of American society, Yezierska endured as an outsider despite her efforts to connect. Katherine Stubbs provides intriguing insights that expand upon Yezierska’s struggles to achieve true belonging. In her introduction to American city. While Fishbein does offer insights worth considering about Yezierska’s alienation from society, her article’s condemning tone and limited examples show very little appreciation for the author’s genuine contribution to Jewish-American women’s literature.
Duke University Press’s 1996 reprint of Yezierska’s 1927 novel *Arrogant Beggar*, Stubbs somewhat agrees with Fishbein about Yezierska’s hyperbolic presentation of herself, but she supplies greater context and a more compassionate interpretation that sheds light on the author’s sense of alienation. Stubbs explains that the public image of Yezierska’s life, which launched her to massive fame in 1920 as a rags-to-riches legend, amounts to a “series of omissions and half-truths,” thereby contributing to her ultimate estrangement (Stubbs ix). This myth presented her to the public as a naïve, uneducated sweatshop worker who personified the immigrant spirit with her breakthrough collection of short stories *Hungry Hearts*. At the time of her discovery and generous movie deal with Samuel Goldwyn, she instantly transformed into the “Sweatshop Cinderella,” moving “From Hester Street to Hollywood” as the stunning epitome of the American Dream and an inspiration for all immigrants. According to Stubbs, Yezierska had much to do with the well-crafted image that omitted her level of education and professional teaching experience while also depicting her as young, single, and poverty-stricken. In reality, Yezierska, on the verge of her forties, had already been married twice, divorced, become the mother of a young daughter, and built a professional background as both a teacher and a social worker. But Yezierska excluded these significant aspects of her history when she daringly entered Hearst columnist Frank Crane’s office without an invitation and described herself in a way that appealed to Goldwyn. The resulting article propelled Yezierska to great fame, helped sell her book, and ultimately gained Goldwyn’s attention, which motivated him to offer her a lucrative contract. Due to this profitable partnership, two of her books, *Hungry Hearts* and *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), were turned into silent movies. Yezierska’s single-minded
persistence and ability to make fruitful connections enabled her to reach an enviable stage as a writer, achieving the recognition and financial stability she had always yearned to obtain.

However, by the time of this second film adaptation in 1925, Yezierska already departed Hollywood to the only place she ever regarded as home, despite the underlying anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant mindset and class divisions that had always disheartened her. Even with New York City’s troubling systemic flaws, though, it still remained her creative muse and where she found inspiration for her writing. As Rose Kamel points out, Yezierska encountered great difficulty with her attempts to generate stories soon after settling in Hollywood. “Far away from the ghetto that nourished her…she suffered acute writer's block” (Kamel 41).\(^\text{12}\) Removed from the subject matter she knew with the most emotional intimacy, Yezierska struggled creatively and confronted barriers she felt unable to overcome, regardless of her newfound wealth and security in the glamorous movie capital. Further expanding upon this notion, Ron Ebest observes that while Hollywood freed Yezierska from New York City’s crowded tenement living, the experience also “liberated her from her immigrant identity” (Ebest 116).\(^\text{13}\) Because of this inner estrangement, where she lost such a significant link to herself and to her past, Yezierska sensed the authenticity of her writing decreased in this glamorous environment. Gradually, she also realized that economic matters and ferocious commercialism superseded a story’s aesthetics in Hollywood, overshadowing the written work’s very purpose. Once Yezierska fully understood the film industry’s priorities, where art occupied such a secondary position, and concluded that

\[\text{12} \text{ Kamel’s 1983 article ‘‘Anzia Yezierska, Get Out of Your Own Way’’: Selfhood and Otherness in the Autobiographical Fiction of Anzia Yezierska’ studies the author’s difficulties in finding success as an immigrant woman writer. In this piece, Kamel discusses the obstacles Yezierska faced largely because of the professional and creative limitations Jewish women of her generation faced.}\]

\[\text{13} \text{ See Ebest’s 2000 article ‘Anzia Yezierska and the Popular Periodical Debate over the Jews.’}\]
she could not write productively while immersed in this materialistic setting, she made the decision to resume her residence in New York.

Yezierska’s initially shrewd marketing technique during this period of exceptional accomplishment and bitter dissatisfaction helps to illuminate the resulting desolation that she endured for so long. In effect, Yezierska locked herself into a fixed representation of the lonesome immigrant searching for the American dream, which did not allow for the perception of her work’s capacity to evolve. Thus, this original strategy limited Yezierska because she intimately linked her own existence with a distorted, oversimplified image of the Jewish woman immigrant’s experience. By looking more broadly at the breadth of Yezierska’s themes and her ability to tell meaningful stories about American society’s systematic cruelty toward outsiders who merely desire an authentic connection to their new world, her fiction traverses well beyond even the author’s own streamlined characterization of it. However, she unwittingly laid a trap for her literary future with this clever scheme to attract readers, which, as Stubbs argues, damaged Yezierska’s resilience in the long-term:

Perhaps the central, tragic paradox of Yezierska’s life as a writer lies in the fact that the legend which had once served to publicize her work ultimately contributed to her downfall. In the popular imagination, she had become so closely identified with her material that when opinions about immigrants and the working class shifted, her work was left behind. (Stubbs xii)

Ironically, Yezierska recognized that her stories, if wrapped in the myth she had woven about herself with such care, could fill a certain niche and she capitalized on this appealing opportunity. However, the misconception that her narratives were exact replicas of her life and experience obscured Yezierska’s artistic skill in weaving relevant social commentary. The unfortunate fusion of Yezierska with her fiction in the minds of her readers ultimately limited her
literary impact. Furthermore, Delia Caparoso Konzett adds yet another dimension to the potential self-sabotage that Yezierska engaged in with her marketing choices. According to Konzett, Yezierska allowed her real-life struggles to be capitalized upon in a sanitized version of the immigrant experience, which diminished her literary value and skill as an important, quite relevant storyteller. Konzett believes the dominant culture simplified, even glamorized, the process of Americanization as well as Anglo-conformity. Consequently, the power of Yezierska’s work became diminished to a mere case study of assimilation, falsely projecting the ease of adopting a new culture. This process ensured that Yezierska herself, the person living this immigrant experience, not the author of meaningful stories, emerged as American society’s primary focus. With this observation as an essential groundwork, Konzett further scrutinizes the damage by explaining Yezierska’s own role in a deceptive ideology that curtailed the author’s impact: “More precisely, it was the image of an ‘authentic’ ethnicity projecting American ideals of self-determination, hard work, and success that captured the hearts of the public, an image that Yezierska helped to create and that Hollywood refined and exploited to its fullest” (Konzett 598). In Konzett’s view, Yezierska’s strategy for bringing attention to her published works prevented genuine appreciation for the artistry and profound messages of her stories. To achieve fame, Yezierska allowed a materialistic society to take advantage of a largely fictionalized

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14 In her 1997 article “Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yezierska’s Hungry Hearts,” Delia Caparoso Konzett offers an in-depth and enlightening analysis on how Yiddish or immigrant English also served to alienate Eastern-European Jews who arrived in America. Konzett closely examines how Yezierska integrates language into her stories to demonstrate the barrier Jewish immigrants endured in their desire to connect with their new culture. Furthermore, Konzett scrutinizes the resulting inarticulateness and cultural displacement that estranges Yezierska’s characters because of the obstacles of language. Most importantly, Konzett argues that Yezierska’s deliberate departures from standard English reflect the “hybrid situation of the new immigrant” (Konzett 615), which mainstream America regarded with contempt and disrespect. Instead of acknowledging and embracing ethnic differences, American society elevated grammatical inconsistencies as a means of judgment and further deepened the cultural divide.
characterization and reduce her to a money-making scheme for public consumption. Indirectly, Konzett suggests that Yezierska performed a disservice to the immigrants whom she represented by diluting the complicated and often distressing challenges of assimilation to a cliché.

To add to this complexity, changing political times contributed to Yezierska’s success with an American audience and served to intensify her personal isolation even further. When Yezierska’s works first gained notice, readers were eagerly receptive to women’s voices. With the recent enactment that granted women the right to vote as well as greater awareness of Eastern and Southern European immigrant populations, which had rapidly increased since Yezierska’s approximate arrival, her stories were enthusiastically received. Readers were also drawn to and intrigued by her twist on the “New Woman” motif, a forceful shift from the mid-nineteenth century cult of domesticity. The New Woman mindset, surfacing in the 1880s, both described and championed the development of American womanhood’s independence on a wide array of topics that ranged from marriage to education. Typically, the New Woman represented those who were American-born, members of the middle class, and white. But Yezierska supplied an innovative angle to this philosophy through characterizations of Jewish women immigrants. This unique element further cemented her initial readership due to an avid interest in ethnic women’s literature. According to Lisa Botshon, Yezierska’s version of the New Woman heightened the concept by expanding it to feature a more diverse womanhood:

Her works, most notably her novels, bring a different sense of the New Woman to popular fiction as they portray the struggles of the Jewish immigrant woman to achieve not only a sense of American citizenship, but also self-determination, independence, and creative and sexual fulfillment, ideals found throughout many strains of the varied New Womanhood. Arguably, it is her characters’ immigrant and ethnic status (their very distance from American cultural norms) that helps them to liberate themselves from traditional women's roles. (Botshon 234)
Indeed, Yezierska’s writings encouraged women from heritages beyond the Anglo-Saxon mainstream to envision more autonomous futures for themselves. Her fiction provided exhilarating and emotionally vibrant examples of how women of all cultures could assert agency over their lives.

However, even as Yezierska’s work attained earnest support from her American audience, other societal factors were emerging at once in the background, eventually helping to deteriorate this loyal patronage and accelerate the author’s own multi-layered alienation. In the midst of Yezierska’s popularity, World War I instigated a patriotic attitude that encouraged more of a nativistic way of thought, directly defying the cultural pluralism Yezierska represented. Simultaneously, the eugenics movement and the Ku Klux Klan gained traction with their demonstrated bigotry toward certain groups that didn’t identify as Anglo-Saxon. On top of this alarming rise of cultural prejudice, the U.S. government reshaped its quota system in 1921 and 1924 to enact restrictions on Eastern European immigration. All of these problematic elements merged together by the late 1920s to diminish the nation’s fascination with ethnic women’s literature, which had embraced Yezierska’s stories earlier in the decade. The nation’s direction veered to an escalating conservatism that crusaded for a strict Americanization of immigrants entering the United States. This campaign pushed to indoctrinate Eastern European populations through a concerted educational campaign, ensuring compliance with the Anglo-Saxon dominant culture. Open and often violent hostility toward foreign populations resistant to complete assimilation increasingly occurred during this period as well. The resulting deviation from tolerance of and an interest in other ancestries to a mandate that ordered the full absorption of incoming cultures contributed to Yezierska’s gradual loss of popularity.
Furthermore, during these intricate societal transformations, Yezierska also felt ambivalent about her subject matter as she relocated back to New York from California to find a more gratifying home for herself. Simultaneously confronting the effects of writer’s block and her disenchantment with Hollywood commercialism, Yezierska started to doubt the image that she had promoted to the public as a spokeswoman for the oppressed. Her growing uncertainty eerily coincided with the nation’s shift away from a compassionate interest in marginalized ethnicities. Yet Yezierska’s rationale did not correspond with the burgeoning anti-immigrant sentiment and urgency for stringent assimilation that developed across the nation. Instead, this detachment from the poverty of her roots centered on Yezierska’s concern for her own survival from impoverished circumstances. She worried about the risk of returning to this state of helplessness without a viable pathway to financial stability.

The urge to disengage from her poverty-stricken past only magnified Yezierska’s personal estrangement. She reflects on this lonely period in her final book Red Ribbon on a White Horse. Specifically, Yezierska recounts a piece of fan mail which stood out to such an extent that she needed to meet the author. Now in New York again and staying at a luxurious hotel on Fifth Avenue, she travels by train back to Hester Street, the destitute tenement community of her youth, to find this Jewish immigrant from Poland who describes a history of despondency similar to her own. His characterization of the hopelessness that surrounds him and the capitalistic mentality of American Judaism, where rich Jews can buy their way into synagogues, thereby demeaning the entire religion, captures Yezierska’s attention. The letter from Boruch Shlomoi Mayer, months old at this time, also intrigues her because it does not plead for Yezierska to supply money or to read an unpublished manuscript. Rather, the writer appears
to seek an emotional connection with her. Furthermore, while Yezierska never notes another obvious link to him, this man has the same surname that her family adopted upon arriving in America, which might have drawn her interest as well. When she finally reaches his apartment, an emaciated woman answers the door, informing Yezierska that the former tenant passed away months ago. Regretful about not answering this man’s letter sooner, Yezierska listens to the woman describe Reb Mayer, an older man akin to her own father in his scholarly focus on sacred texts, and looks around the crowded, dirty apartment. The bedroom has numerous books, which, Yezierska discovers when she lifts one, contain bed bugs. As she absorbs the pitiable space, Yezierska learns from this woman, who also happens to be the landlord, that Reb Mayer owed six months of rent. Yezierska quickly provides a bill to cover this cost and tries to rush away as the grateful landlord grabs her arm, asking if she is this tenant’s family member. Before escaping, Yezierska confirms that they are related “in a way” (Yezierska, Red Ribbon 99).

Although she misrepresents her association to this man, an important bond does exist that anchors her to a past she had physically left behind, but still carries with her in all its rawness.

When Yezierska hastily retreats from Reb Mayer’s address, however, thoughts of him and his suffering fade to reveal distress about her disconnection from the world. Complicated by a persistent guilt that Yezierska tries to subdue, her detachment becomes defensiveness against slipping into desperate insolvency again. As she races out of her old neighborhood, Yezierska feels intense misery that leads to an overwhelming concern for her own survival:

> The hotel room was not far enough away. I could not put enough space between me and the squalor, the noise, the smells I had fled. I was more than ever out of step with everything and everybody around me. Often when I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a strange likeness to that poverty-crushed, bewildered hag. Her eyes followed me about like the eyes of a lost frightened animal. Once you knew what poor people suffered it kept gnawing at you. You’d been there
yourself. You wanted to reach out and help. But if you did, you were afraid you might be dragged back into the abyss. (Yezierska, Red Ribbon 99)

In this passage, Yezierska renders a complicated and remorseful response to the poverty she had the good fortune to transcend while others did not. Self-reproach in reaction to her success, empathy for the poor based on personal experience, a genuine desire to offer assistance, and, fundamentally, extensive worries about falling back into that same wretchedness fuse together to amplify Yezierska’s complex, visceral reaction to this reunion with Hester Street. However, one critical facet remains unstated, though it also contributes to the elaborate swirl of emotions that confront Yezierska during this incident. She yearns to feel connected and ease the unhappiness experienced in Hollywood upon her return to New York. While Yezierska never states this reality as an explanation for seeking out Reb Mayer, a potential kindred spirit, hints exist within the narrative. The feasibility of this theory becomes strikingly conceivable in the context of her book’s previous chapter titled “A Cat in the Bag,” which ends with her decision not to sign a generous contract with film producer William Fox. Faced with the prospect of either preserving her literary integrity through a refusal to become an overworked cog in the Hollywood movie machine or walking away to a life of probable poverty, she chooses to exit this heavily commercialized environment. Immediately, she feels pained by the decision and contemplates: “I could have returned the unsigned contract by mail, but before going back to loneliness and obscurity, I wanted to take a look at the theatrical splendor of the William Fox office” (Yezierska 87). This insight, which acknowledges that the powerful price of abandoning such luxury means the risk of desolate insignificance, helps explain, at least in part, Yezierska’s subsequent commiseration with Boruch Mayer and eagerness to meet him. Even more tellingly, the chapter concludes with fear and regret about her uncertain future ahead due to declining the contract. She
leaves the movie producer’s office without the security of a clear direction: “I walked out, released from the terrible burden of indecision. I looked up at the sky. God! Where do I go from here…?” (Yezierska, *Red Ribbon* 87). These final sentences illustrate the uncomfortable suspense that she experienced during such a bewildering time in her life. At this crucial crossroads, Yezierska feels lost and alone despite an innate knowledge that she chose the best, though most difficult, path for herself. Through Yezierska’s established framework of unnerving solitude, where she has no anchor to guide her, the desire to meet Reb Mayer logically demonstrates a wish to associate with like-minded individuals and develop substantial connections to reduce the loneliness. Sadly, this longing to overcome a pervasive alienation never seemed to improve, even with her accomplishments and the impressive opportunities that honored her storytelling skills. Stuck in a cycle of guilt, emotional distance, and an ever-present urge to find some sort of sanctuary of her own, Yezierska’s desire to belong remained fundamentally out of reach.

Similar to her complex misgivings about the William Fox movie contract, in which rejection of the offer forecasted further isolation, a notable short story echoes Yezierska’s worst fears. The autobiographical piece now included in the short story collection *Hungry Hearts* titled “This is What $10,000 Did to Me” reflects upon how the benefits of receiving a large sum of money actually estranged Yezierska from her lifelong culture. Detailing her ascent to wealth upon the publication of *Hungry Hearts*, her immediate access to America’s powerful ruling class, and the unwanted emotional seclusion from her heritage that resulted, this story documents Yezierska’s path to a solitary, disconnected existence. As an interesting note, the piece had not been written yet when Houghton Mifflin Company first published *Hungry Hearts* in 1920. At the
time, Yezierska still lived as an anonymous teacher and aspiring writer. However, in later editions, this first-person narrative, though not positioned as the book’s final piece, represents an epilogue of sorts. It thoughtfully chronicles Yezierska’s transformation from a struggling, isolated immigrant Jew in search of the American dream to the media’s dubbed “Sweatshop Cinderella,” author of a bestselling book. To provide more context, Yezierska’s daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen explains in the preface of Hungry Hearts’ 1985 Persea Books edition that the story first appeared within the October 1925 issue of Cosmopolitan magazine. Henriksen, who refers to Yezierska by her first name, offers crucial insights about this author’s frame of mind five years after the original publication of Hungry Hearts and three years after the book’s film adaptation through Samuel Goldwyn’s studio:

Anzia tells in that story the consequences of making so much money from the book. She never overcame her guilt for having become rich by writing about the poor, nor her tragic sense of loneliness because she had changed her circumstances so drastically. (Henriksen ix)¹⁵

Like her conscience-stricken reflections after meeting the landlord at Boruch Mayer’s home, Yezierska’s short story delves into her self-condemnation at earning such wealth through heart-wrenching subject matter. She cannot help questioning that her good fortune flourished at the expense of others who suffered without the same chance to achieve financial comfort. What’s more, Yezierska comprehends the hopeless circumstances of her characters with the empathic compassion of one who has lived in such an extremely deprived world herself, heightening that

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¹⁵ Henriksen had a difficult relationship with Yezierska, who ultimately chose to focus on writing rather than motherhood. As a child, Henriksen’s connection to Yezierska mostly existed through letters. But Henriksen, raised by her father Arnold Levitas (Yezierska’s second former husband) and grandmother, came to terms with this distant maternal connection. Two decades after Yezierska’s death, she wrote her mother’s official biography Anzia Yezierska: A Writer’s Life (1991). It is also worth noting that Alice Kessler-Harris contacted Henrikson in 1973 to learn more about Yezierska and to obtain permission to republish the author’s works.
sense of responsibility. This knowledge inspires an intricate blend of emotions that often clashes with each other and causes an inner paralysis without resolution. Yezierska’s perceived duty to help those struggling in her former community, anxiety over the possibility of sinking back into terrible poverty, and reconciliation with her new identity as part of the more affluent class culminate in an even deeper isolation than ever before.

In this brief piece, Yezierska explores many of the same painful themes that she later weaves throughout Red Ribbon on a White Horse, explaining how the attainment of such great success devastated any connection to this author’s heritage and left her basically abandoned. Yet this particular first-person story offers a different angle. With its heavy criticism of American wealth, Yezierska depicts an evolving perspective as she moves from a struggling, unacknowledged writer to great fame and prosperity. Before her instant transition to financial means, Yezierska recounts a furious moment during the holiday season while walking along Fifth Avenue, where she notices an elaborate Christmas tree in one of the store windows:

Why should there be Christmas in the world? Why this holiday spirit on Fifth Avenue when there’s no holiday for Hester Street? Why these expectant, smiling faces of the shoppers buying useless presents for each other, when we didn’t know from where would come our next meal? (Yezierska 300-301)

The notable inequality between wealthy Christians and poor Jews, all residing in the same city amidst such unbalanced social and cultural divisions, supplies a compelling foundation within the story’s first pages. Yezierska lays out the opulent excess of the mainstream, Anglo-Saxon environment and its alienating effect on her. As Fifth Avenue lavishly celebrates a holiday that excludes the Jewish population, Hester Street fights just to stay alive in its sordidness. This unjust reality not only fills Yezierska with disgust, but it also reinforces her position as an
outsider. destined to observe gleeful abundance without the ability to experience the grandeur firsthand.

Yet these dynamics change considerably when Yezierska receives a life-altering telegram that lifts her from virtual anonymity, automatically extracting this author from the outside and into the media’s spotlight. One day, she comes home to find a message that requests the film rights of her book *Hungry Hearts*. The agent sending this communication offers ten thousand dollars to obtain permission. Earlier in her story “This is What $10,000 Did to Me,” Yezierska explains that her book represented a collection of fiction published by various magazines over an extensive period of time with some complimentary reviews, but a negligible amount of income. She claims that until this extraordinary proposal to adapt her book into a movie, “I had been writing and starving for years” (Yezierska 301). In addition, Yezierska notes that despite achieving publication, the accomplishment had not dramatically improved her strained economical existence. “Although reviewers praised it, my royalties were so small that it brought me little money and almost no recognition. People who read a book little know what small reward there is for the writer while he is still unknown – of his often solitary, starved existence” (Yezierska 301). Indeed, Yezierska clarifies that despite the success of seeing her work in book-form, her finances stayed just as dire as before. According to Yezierska’s depiction, however, she receives this phenomenal proposition unexpectedly and without any effort on her part. Yet certain scholars, including Leslie Fishbein and Katherine Stubbs, disagree with this portrayal since Yezierska engaged in a determined campaign to promote herself, principally by seeking out media attention for her book. In fact, Stubbs precisely confirms Yezierska’s active involvement in soliciting publicity. Within her introduction to *Arrogant Beggar*, Stubbs writes: “Yezierska
first came to Goldwyn’s attention because the Hearst columnist Frank Crane wrote an article that described the author exactly in the mythic terms she had dictated to him when entering his office unannounced (Stubbs x). Therefore, Yezierska substantially contributed to her own rise with the shrewd calculation of using the media to enable the widespread awareness of her work to powerful individuals. Yet Ron Ebest offers a much different angle for examining Yezierska’s entrance in Crane’s office. He questions whether or not Yezierska possessed an awareness of this tactic as a manipulation of the media or if she had been conditioned by the American culture to adopt its view of Russian Jews as secondary and inferior to the Anglo-Saxon way of thought:

To the extent that Yezierska’s rhetorical strategy was conscious, it presumably reflected, at least in part, her formal education and her sponsorship by Dewey and others. If it is impossible to establish the extent to which that strategy was conscious, it is at least fair to say that the strategy was consistent. Repeatedly in her stories, Yezierska confronted elements or stereotypes which had already been codified by the periodicals as touchstones in the debate over the Jews. Rarely did she refute these touchstones. Instead she embraced them, annexed them into her work, and then re-interpreted them in ways that acquitted the Russian Jews of responsibility for them. (Ebest 122)

According to Ebest, Yezierska may have already accepted and embraced the established clichés of her given culture through messages she absorbed in her own advanced education. Therefore, Ebest suggests that Yezierska did not enter Crane’s office with the intent of misrepresenting herself to gain nationwide publicity through the Hearst newspaper distribution.

Despite the intrigue of such a varying perspective, Yezierska’s well-known reputation as a talented storyteller, ironically able to connect with audiences even while engaged in a solitary struggle to find a place for herself in the world, contradicts this explanation. According to Alice Kessler-Harris, one of the most preeminent scholars of Yezierska, the author embodied this talent, both in written and spoken form, until her death. In her 1999 Introduction to Bread
Givers, Kessler-Harris furnishes a solid argument for Yezierska’s great ability to captivate an audience: “She died in 1970, an old woman with failing eyesight, still a marvelous teller of stories and, by her daughter’s account, ‘an explosion to everyone’” (Kessler-Harris xxix). Based on these insights, it seems more likely that Yezierska understood the intricacies of the media machine and maneuvered it to her benefit. The reality that Yezierska omits the deliberate encounter with a reporter from the representation of her sudden fame demonstrates both an artful flair for storytelling and an astute ability to use publications to her promotional advantage, an issue that, as Delia Caparoso Konzett argues, helps undermine this author’s long-term literary impact. Indeed, Yezierska’s presence later suffers due to the false impression that her work explicitly and thoroughly reflects personal experience alone and without fictional touches. Yet the truth behind Yezierska’s storytelling mastery is far more complex. Each piece contains a dexterous and quite skillfully conceived shape that past and present critics often underestimate. While this particular piece comes across as mostly autobiographical, integrating certain facts from her rise to literary stardom, Yezierska portrays herself as much more passive in this transformation to fame than history submits, which lends itself to the persona she had so carefully crafted. Furthermore, the exclusion of particular details illustrates that even a piece which appears autobiographical can contain exaggerations or distortions, depending on how the author wishes to present herself. Perhaps Yezierska preferred to paint her literary triumph as based purely on a discovery of her talent and without any interference on her part. Or it might be that she inherently understood the misogynistic bias against assertive women in the context of her own oppressive upbringing as an Orthodox Jew. In any case, Yezierska does not incorporate this crucially important detail about her nature and, as a result, portrays herself in a much more
innocent, wondrous light when recounting the opportunity from Samuel Goldwyn that transformed her entire life.

Despite this glossing over of a pivotal aspect of Yezierska’s journey to prominence, other facets of this short story, confirmed by multiple scholars, reinforce the actual misgivings and self-doubt that privately haunted the author in her search for acceptance. After showing steadfast resolve to break free from the ghetto, distinguish herself as an author, and garner significant wealth, she cannot reconcile her newfound comfort with a lifelong hatred of American materialism. To admit she enjoyed an opulent lifestyle would mean an automatic reconfiguration of all her values, necessitating a traumatic reset that could cause inner estrangement. Yezierska’s turmoil reaches this severe level as she questions whether or not to abandon Hollywood and return home to New York. In “This is What $10,000 Did to Me,” Yezierska views her Hollywood existence akin to immorality for it contradicts the virtues that have shaped her identity. “Security buys peace of mind to develop a soul. And here I was losing the very soul that my security was giving me. For now I was a capitalist – one of the class that I hated” (Yezierska 312). This reasoning plays a primary role in her eventual decision to depart from California, allowing Yezierska to preserve her innermost self, even while risking financial security in the process. By moving out of Hollywood, a place that offered her endless amounts of money as she assisted in the adaption of Hungry Hearts, Yezierska could separate from any association with capitalistic values and avoid feeling ashamed of herself. Before she finally resolves to leave, though, she receives an overwhelming amount of mail at her Hollywood hotel, pleading for money. The experience disturbs her on a multitude of emotional levels that range from uneasiness to guilt to confusion:
People who have always been comfortable can’t know what it means to come into sudden wealth. My mail was full of begging letters. Poor relatives besieged me for money. And my conscience told me that if I were true to my soul I’d give all. I had hated the rich because they kept their wealth and refused to share it with the rest of the world. But how was I to begin to share? (Yezierska 313)

The demands made on her are stressful and ones that she would never have anticipated, adding yet another cause for Yezierska’s agitated response to affluence. From an ethical vantage point, she feels it would be best to distribute her newfound funds to everyone who requests monetary help from her. Such a move could only underscore her principled division from the traditional rich, whom Yezierska always viewed as hoarders of their prosperity. Yet she does not know how or where to begin with such a plan. In time, however, the uncertainty shifts to resentment, where she justifies her ownership of the financial gains received: “I’ve earned what I’ve got. What right have they to it? Let them produce Hungry Hearts. Let them suffer and agonize for every little word as I suffered and agonized” (Yezierska 313). To defend herself against this deluge of desperate pleas, Yezierska turns against the appeals, adopting the type of entitled attitude that she detests from the ultra-wealthy. Yet Yezierska does offer a valid argument that her money has been obtained through hard work and, in spite of the many mixed emotions that influence any enjoyment of it, she constructed this economic stability fairly. Through all of the stages of agitation, though, Yezierska establishes the complexities that come with money, showing how her perspective progresses once she obtains direct experience with an excess of this commodity.

In the end, financial comfort and fame fail to give Yezierska the advantages she had always imagined, essentially divorcing her from not just her values, but from her own Jewish roots. She concludes the story by describing a solitary life back in New York. Interacting in a new social class, where she occasionally meets with other people of similar means, the author
admits to an emotionally anemic existence. Yezierska feels disconnected from her heritage and, remembering the past, wishes she had appreciated her community more while living in the tenements:

Now, as I sit alone in my room, watching the wonder of the sunset, I look back and see how happy I ought to have been when I was starving poor, but one of my own people. Now I am cut off by my own for acquiring the few things I have. And those new people with whom I dine and to whom I talk, I do not belong to them. I am alone because I left my own world. (Yezierska 315)

These despondent contemplations depict Yezierska’s consistent sense of alienation, whether destitute or wealthy. While living in the ghetto, where she struggled among other Jews, Yezierska had greater unity with her culture, but focused exclusively on escaping to a better existence. Through her own ingenuity, she determined a strategy to bring positive attention to her written works and successfully navigated an Anglo-Saxon society with anti-Semitic and sexist leanings that viewed her as the Other. Defying those dominant odds to reach her goal, Yezierska lost the cultural affinity she had taken for granted. Sadly, she did not have the perspective then to recognize the worth of this ancestral attachment until it vanished. In either sphere, therefore, she feels suspended, unable to establish herself anywhere and feel at home. Delia Caparoso Konzett takes a global perspective of Yezierska’s heroines and observes the tragic irony that occurs when these protagonists actually reach their envisioned goals within American culture. Konzett claims that the fervent wish of Yezierska’s characters “to enter the American mainstream society proves an empty illusion when integration has been successfully achieved” (Konzett 597). To be sure, whenever Yezierska’s personas triumph through the attainment of wealth and security, they lose their former connections to community, forfeiting their ethnic origins, leaving them emotionally vacant. Yezierska’s mournful conclusion in this particular piece underscores her distrust of the
materialistic America she critiques earlier in the story, which brings her back full circle to this piece’s opening paragraphs. Because of her negativity toward effusive wealth, she feels alienated from herself, now a member of this social stratum, by the story’s end.

Yezierska’s inner strife, which she examines within most every piece of her published writing, reveals a complicated woman whose painful isolation derives from a constant sense of suspension between multiple worlds. Yet, as Alice Kessler-Harris discovers, one element serves to weave Yezierska’s consciousness together in a cohesive and meaningful way. Above all else, Yezierska reflects an eagerness to lead an expressive life of consequence. Through extensive interviews with the people who knew Yezierska best, Kessler-Harris offers a compelling portrait of this author. She offers her observations in the 1999 Foreword for Bread Givers:

> From them I began to understand the fiery spirit that drove Anzia’s longing to become somebody in the world; that confusion that possessed her when she tried to reconcile herself to the life of a traditional wife and mother; the strength of her desire to articulate the unspoken feeling. (Kessler-Harris x)

Kessler-Harris’s investigation of Yezierska provides greater depth on the writer than scholarly analysis alone. Delving into this author’s most basic motivation, Kessler-Harris reveals that Yezierska hungered to convey her emotions in written form and Old World, Jewish womanhood could never begin to fulfill her needs. In fact, the prospect overwhelmed her to the point of extreme misery and an acute inclination to escape. Moreover, she refused to comply with the oppressive forces that existed in the Jewish community, particularly through her nuclear family, as well as the doubly authoritative anti-Semitism and sexism Yezierska experienced from the mainstream American culture. While bringing to life the author’s vibrant intensity and willingness to disobey the repressive norms that constricted Eastern-European Jewish women, Kessler-Harris also shows the other side of such a single-minded pursuit of freedom and creative
agency, offering a less flattering view of Yezierska. From an obsessive need to write that outweighed any consideration for the needs of others around her to a stubborn egotism, Kessler-Harris draws a pivotal conclusion about Yezierska based on numerous interviews: “Everyone admired her and no one could bear to be with her for very long” (Kessler-Harris xi). This revelation helps explain the complexity of Yezierska’s alienation, which derived not only from her fundamental inability to find a safe, comfortable haven for herself in an elaborately intolerant culture, but a self-absorbed nature that blocked her from the formation of long-term, enriching relationships.

The knowledge of Yezierska’s powerful strengths and lamentable flaws supply the concrete substance that fuels her difficult journey to verbalize injustices against the marginalized while also asserting a place to call her own. Indeed, her fiction provides integral awareness as a window to the deplorable conditions European Jews were forced to endure on the Lower East Side of New York City. Furthermore, she vehemently advocates for a greater understanding of the cultural displacement inflicted on Jewish immigrants. Many of her stories focus on how government social workers imposed American ideals on new arrivals. This deliberate effort attempted to diminish immigrants’ Judaic values in order to demand a nationalistic acquiescence without any respect for obvious cultural differences. Ellyn Lem argues that Yezierska’s writings critically scrutinize the impoverished, anti-Semitic world this immigrant Jewish author experienced upon settling in America. Lem states that most of Yezierska’s fiction “could not be fully captured without the voices of those people who had no other ‘home’” (Lem 71). In essence, Yezierska represents the perspective of newcomers from another culture who must

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16 See Lem’s 1995 article “A Voice out of the Fishbowl: Yezierska’s Argument for Seeing the Slum from Within.”
make a fresh start within an unfriendly, unfamiliar society. Ron Ebest builds on Lem’s claim to demonstrate how Yezierska’s work highlights America’s blatant mistreatment of Jewish immigrants:

...Yezierska’s depictions of the lower East Side were much different from those of other periodical writers. This is because, unlike the others, Yezierska never used the ghetto as a metaphor for Jewish personality. Instead her representations of the tenements revealed a subtler purpose. In many of her short stories, Yezierska suggested a causal relationship between American indifference and sweatshop labor. (Ebest 112)

Indeed, Yezierska challenges the prejudice inflicted on Jews living in ghetto conditions and barely making sustainable wages as sweatshop workers. She argues that America’s apathy built this problematic environment, not defective characteristics in the Jewish immigrants themselves. Her stories underscore how Jews were the victims of an American system that actively discriminated against their cultural practices. Christopher N. Okonkwo reinforces Ebest’s argument by stating that “Yezierska’s ultimate message is that society should not attempt to mandate repression of authentic difference” (Okonkwo 144).17 Yezierska serves as a defender of diversity, particularly campaigning for the acceptance of Jewish immigrants within America’s borders.

In Yezierska’s collection of short stories Hungry Hearts, she explores these powerful themes in raw, often emotional detail, specifically focusing on Jewish immigrant women who seek a more favorable homeland in America, the anti-Semitism they encounter, and the government intrusion that mischaracterizes their Judaic culture to support societal bigotry.

Throughout the twelve stories originally published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in 1920,

Yezierska illustrates painful contrasts between the heated desires of Jewish immigrants to thrive in their idealized America and the cruel reality of systemic repression that they face within the broader society. For the most part, her protagonists are emotional, articulate, and determined women who already suffer from the ingrained oppression of Judaic practice carried to America from the Old World and are willing to endure further hardship to achieve refuge in their adopted culture. Despite this sexism and mistreatment, where they struggle in Lower East Side ghettos, Yezierska’s heroines persevere to obtain belonging within America and cure their isolation. In Susan Hersh Sachs’s view, Yezierska continually revisits this theme, exploring it from various angles as a significant core of numerous short stories, because she never quite reconciled this conflict within her own life. Sachs muses: “Her creative writing, dramatic that it is, in turn shed light on the vivacity of many immigrant women of her generation who sought a place for themselves in America” (Sachs 66). For the most part, the protagonists featured in Yezierska’s works reflect the author’s expressive boldness and single-minded determination to find a sanctuary of their own in mainstream American society.

Beginning with the first story titled “Wings,” Yezierska sets the ever-hopeful tone of this anthology with a young, lonely Jewish woman from Russia who strives to explore her new American home and transcend the discomfort as an outsider. Shenah Pessah, desperately yearning to connect, expresses her misery from the piece’s opening sentences: “‘My heart chokes in me like a prison! I’m dying for a little love and I got nobody – nobody!’ wailed Shenah Pessah, as she looked out of the dismal basement window” (Yezierska 1). The agony in Shenah

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18 Sachs’s 1983 article “Anzia Yezierska: ‘Her words dance with a thousand colors’” offers a biography of this author through the passion within her work. In addition, Sachs discusses how Yezierska’s narrative voice represents the desire immigrant women of that era felt in trying to find acceptance in America.
Pessah’s voice derives from her loneliness and disillusionment. Beholden to her uncle, the manager of a Lower East Side tenement and responsible for bringing her to America, she imagined an enlightened life of love and adventure upon her arrival. Instead, Shenah Pessah spends her days focused on the building and the tenants’ needs with no time for herself, locked by an obligation to her uncle. Therefore, Shenah Pessah’s only real contact with the city outside comes from what she can see from this dirty peek hole below street level.

However, Shenah Pessah’s prospects brighten, potentially ending her bitter isolation, when a handsome man comes to the doorway “a framed picture of her innermost dreams” (Yezierska 3) and asks to see an advertised room for rent. Yezierska reveals important information about Shenah Pessah’s rootlessness, where she even lived with strangers in Russia, and the man’s academic interest in Russian immigrants within moments of their conversation.

The renter, who never introduces himself except through Yezierska’s narration, is named John Barnes, an instructor of sociology at his university, and delighted “at his good fortune in encountering such a splendid type for his research” (Yezierska 5). By sharing their radically opposed thoughts in this first conversation, Yezierska shows sharp differences in the couple’s mutual attraction, which foreshadows Shenah Pessah’s inevitable heartache to come. But during their interaction, when Barnes reveals to her that he teaches, this expectant heroine is drawn even further by his important role: “‘I could tell right away that you must be some kind of somebody,’ she said, looking up with wistful worship in her eyes” (Yezierska 5). Such passionate adulation of those with perceived power weaves frequently throughout Yezierska’s stories, where Jewish immigrant women fantasize about attaining the love and security of an Anglo-Saxon man. While Yezierska does not explicitly state John Barnes’ heritage, she alludes to it when Shenah Pessah
first sees him, not hearing his words at first, but noticing his “loose Scotch tweeds, the pongee shirt, a bit open at the neck” (Yezierska 3). The clothes that he wears and his respectable position, from Shenah Pessah’s vantage point, represent the life she craves in America. To be sure, Alice Kessler-Harris confirms Yezierska’s recurring motif, where Jewish immigrant women are romantically drawn to Anglo-Saxon manhood. Kessler-Harris describes the significance of this concept in her Introduction to Bread Givers:

The tall Anglo-Saxon male appears repeatedly in Yezierska’s work. To the immigrant girl he is an inspiring figure. Older and infinitely more sophisticated than she, he appears as the measured and calm epitome of her aspirations. To her, he represents reason and civilization. To become like him, she strives to get away from the Yiddish language and to suppress her displays of feeling. (Kessler-Harris xxxii)

According to Kessler-Harris’s framework, Barnes (or “Mr. Barnes” as Shenah Pessah refers to him in her thoughts) embodies her successful passage to Americanization and, thereby, acceptance in this new culture. Ironically, just as Barnes views her as the ideal scientific study for his scholarly work, she sees the neat, clean, educated image of him as her license to belonging. While her outlook reflects a romantic hope of connection, it is equally as reductive and simplistic as Barnes’ initial response to her.

After this new boarder takes the room and agrees to help Shenah Pessah improve her English, the young immigrant becomes fixated on enhancing her appearance, never detecting that she only encapsulates the perfect specimen to him, not a future spouse. From her perspective, though, his regard would transform her into a person who matters. At one point, she stares at herself in a piece of broken mirror and exclaims: “‘God from the world!’ she prayed. ‘I’m nothing and nobody now, but ach! How beautiful I would become if only the light from his eyes would fall on me!’” (Yezierska 11). In her lowly position at this dark, gloomy tenement, she
feels invisible to the world and assumes Barnes’s attentiveness will reverse her misery. But Yezierska adds yet another dehumanizing layer to her heroine’s desolate life through the uncle, who also regards Shenah Pessah as an instrument for his gain. One evening when Shenah Pessah has finished her work, she overhears Mrs. Melker the matchmaker propose a husband for his niece. Although Shenah Pessah has no dowry, this older man, a fish-peddler, wants a wife to cook for him and take care of his children. Mrs. Melker claims her motive in informing the uncle is to “‘do something good for a poor orphan’” because “‘it weeps in me my heart to see a girl in her years and not married’” (Yezierska 13). The uncle reacts with anger at such an idea, but not out of a sense of protectiveness. Instead, he objects to a loss of his investment since he paid the ticket for her to come to America. “‘Oughtn’t I have a little use from her for so many dollars I laid out for her?’” (Yezierska 13). Through the dynamics that Yezierska presents in her straightforward descriptions dominated by dialogue, people regard each other as tools to advance themselves in some manner, necessitating a constant division and relationships incapable of genuine depth.

Eventually, a fleeting romance does develop between Shenah Pessah and Barnes, which unites them in an impassioned kiss before cultural divisions interfere. As the two leave the library together on their first date, John Barnes finds himself drawn to Shenah Pessah, enchanted by her honesty and enthusiasm, which causes an urge to become closer. “He drank the pure joy out of her eyes. For the moment, the girl beside him was the living flame of incarnate Spring” (Yezierska 29). In this moment, Barnes looks beyond their class differences without any hierarchies involved. But when he finally reaches for her, Shenah Pessah’s subordinate identity becomes the first phrase from his lips: “‘Poor little immigrant!’ murmured John Barnes. ‘How
lonely, how barren your life must have been till – ‘In an impulse of compassion, his arms opened and Shenah Pessah felt her soul swoon in ecstasy as he drew her toward him’ (Yezierska 30).

Now that her fantasy has come true, Shenah Pessah feels joyous and envisions a romance ahead for the two lovers. However, days pass without her seeing him. Crushed, she wanders into his room when he arrives home unexpectedly. Barnes then offers an apology, calling that night “‘a passing moment of forgetfulness,’” which fills Shenah Pessah with such grief that she runs out of the room (Yezierska 32). At the sight of her escape, Barnes appears incapable of understanding her shame and explains away the emotional response before him, repressing his own feelings, too, in the process: “‘No matter how valuable the scientific inquiry might prove to be, you can’t let the girl run away with herself’” (Yezierska 33). Deliberately overlooking the moment they had shared, even while denigrating her before their kiss, Barnes reverts back to stiff intellectualism, a characteristic Yezierska often assigns to the Anglo-Saxon men in her stories.

By contrast, Shenah Pessah illustrates a perfect comprehension of her feelings, which shows her alienation exists in the outside world. Ironically, though seen as secondary by the culture she must navigate, she possesses a healthier knowledge of herself than her counterpart, an accepted member of the American society. Yet Shenah Pessah cannot reconcile with Barnes’ excuse for avoiding her: “‘Why did he make me to shame telling me he didn’t mean nothing? Is it because I’m not a lady alike to him? Is a gentleman only a make-believe man?’” (Yezierska 34). Unfortunately, Shenah Pessah does not have the insight into Barnes’ mind to grasp the reasoning behind his inconsistent behavior. Because of that fact, she assumes his rejection can only be due to a flaw in her that must be rectified. Therefore, she resolves to find some way to prove herself to him:
Show him what’s in you. If it takes a year, or a million years, you got to show him you’re a person. From now on, you got why to live. You got to work not with the strength of one body and one brain, but with the strength of a million bodies and a million brains. By day and by night, you got to push, push yourself up till you get to him and can look him in the face eye to eye. (Yezierska 34)

Accustomed to hard work, Shenah Pessah looks at winning Barnes’s heart as a labor she must tackle. This resolve reflects the same passion that Yezierska herself demonstrated in making a name for herself, a resolve to prove her worthiness to those with power. Intriguingly, Shenah Pessah’s effort to sway Barnes back to her transforms into a demand for equality by the end. She does not intend to look at him from below as his inferior, but at face level and eye to eye. Yet in the very last line, Shenah Pessah reverts to seeing him as someone to idolize and quite superior to herself when she states: “‘After all, he done for you more than you could do for him. You owe it to him the deepest, the highest he waked up in you. He opened the wings of your soul’” (Yezierska 34). The blind subservience and eager willingness to accept such a secondary stature as stated within this concluding line negate all of the dignity reflected in Shenah Pessah’s thoughts earlier on the same page. Additionally, it shows the confusing complexity of this brief yet troubled relationship with its unpredictable swerves concerning power, dominance, and insurmountable cultural partitions.

At any rate, the attempt to obtain the affections of an Anglo-Saxon man amounts to far more than a romantic relationship alone because it actually represents an assured home within America’s borders. By winning John Barnes, Shenah Pessah would likely have found a secure pathway out of the ghetto and a safe haven in her new homeland. Indeed, Yezierska frequently revisits the notion of Jewish women immigrants in search of some sort of lucrative connection to anchor them to American stability in the form of a refuge. This link can be in the form of an elite
American-born man, where fantasies of romance blossom, or simply the hope of finding a good friend to ease the confusion and loneliness caused by America’s indifference. Story after story in *Hungry Hearts* focuses on a heroine’s traumatic journey to dejection, where she often feels confused by the American culture’s disregard once she traverses beyond the more tight-knit, Jewish ghetto community. It is only when she makes an advantageous contact on the outside, whether through romance or an emotional bond, that she finally feels at home in America.

One particular story titled “The Miracle” offers similar motifs as “Wings” except with a much happier ending, where the youthful Jewish immigrant succeeds in her search for a romantic cure from immense disheartenment. Also like “Wings,” this story begins with a strong, first-person voice, though the confessional tone remains throughout the piece without the distance of a third-person narration: “Like all people who have nothing, I lived on dreams. With nothing but my longing for love, I burned my way through stone walls till I got to America. And what happened to me when I became an American is more than I can picture before my eyes, even in a dream” (Yezierska 114). This narrator, who never identifies herself by name beyond “a poor Melamid’s [the Hebrew word for “teacher’s”] daughter in Savel, Poland” in the story’s second paragraph, explains her intense need to find an intimate partner. By instinct, she believes the fulfillment of her desire can only occur in America. After receiving an exuberant letter from Hannah Hayyeh, a former resident of this Polish village now engaged and living in America, also one of Yezierska’s recurring characters, the narrator feels more convinced than ever that she should move to this country, too. In time, she convinces her parents to sell the family’s precious Saifer Torah, or Holy Scrolls, and Sabbath candlesticks for the fifty rubles necessary to purchase a ticket. Pained, the parents agree and before saying goodbye at the train, her father reminds the
hopeful narrator of her heritage: “‘Remember you come from Jews. Remember to pray every
day,’ said my father, putting his hands over my head, like in blessing on the day of Atonement”
(Yezierska 126). This parental guidance previews the alienation to come, something this young
immigrant woman does not anticipate in her idealized excitement of a romantically satisfying
American life.

Inevitably, the narrator’s actual existence does not match her fantasy in any respect for
she must labor long hours to survive and feels the constant weight of loneliness. In addition, the
miserable heroine never has the opportunity to meet a potential mate when she first gets settled.
The rosy picture that Hannah Hayyeh paints does not resemble this narrator’s experience, whose
only contact with men occurs on the street or in cars. After a succession of disappointments, she
withdraws entirely and hides in her room for days. Separated from all contact, the narrator
successfully counsels herself and, in time, a will to overcome this expansive isolation energizes
her to action:

Suddenly I sprang up from my bed. “What can come from pitying yourself?” I
cried. “If the world kicks you down and makes nothing of you, you bounce yourself
up and make something of yourself.” A fire blazed up in me to rise over the world
because I was downed by the world. (Yezierska 132)

Like Shenah Pessah’s motivating speech to herself, this inner lecture resembles Yezierska’s own
fierce spirit. It reflects a refusal to succumb and encourages the narrator to move her experience
in the direction of education. Working by day, the narrator attends classes at night and
encounters a kind teacher who allows her to catch up with the work because she enrolled later
than the other students. Because of his open, generous nature, she views him as someone
important and, more crucially, the epitome of the America she so desires: “The minute I looked
on him I felt that grand feeling: ‘Here is a person! Here is America!’ His face just shined with
high thoughts” (Yezierska 133). Indeed, this ambitious woman sees her instructor as a man of high achievements, the essence of the country she has imagined and now adopted as her own.

Over a short period of time, the narrator and her teacher develop a friendship from conversations after class, encouraging a warm attachment to blossom between them. At one point, this instructor asks his student about the nature of her eagerness to learn. The narrator’s answer mirrors what she admires in her teacher and the glamorized greatness that she assigns to him: “Because I want to make a person of myself,” I answered” (Yezierska 134). To Yezierska, becoming a “person” reflected concrete accomplishment, rising above an anonymous crowd to matter in some undeniable way. This narrator and her values derive from Yezierska’s most heartfelt objective in life. As such, the teacher’s affection for this heroine deepens. In reassuring her that her impassioned drive to learn deserves encouragement and should not be suppressed like the “born Americans” whom she observes around her, he states: “You are the promise of the centuries to come. You are the heart, the creative pulse of America to be” (Yezierska 137). In other words, just as she views her educator as symbolic of America’s eminence, the narrator epitomizes the same, if not higher, potential because of the future that she represents.

Love eventually blossoms between the two, connecting them well beyond their intellectual bond and outside of the classroom when he rushes to see the narrator in her modest room. On this story’s last page, the moment that they emotionally unite is the first time Yezierska delineates their widely different backgrounds with such clarity. This teacher is member of the American elite, but unlike other Anglo-Saxon men who prove painfully elusive to the raw sincerity of Yezierska’s Jewish women, he cherishes his immigrant student without a hint of punishment:
He put his cool, strong hand into mine. “You can save me,” he said. “You can free me from the bondage of age-old repressions. You can lift me out of the dead grooves of sterile intellectuality. Without you I am the dry dust of hopes unrealized. You are fire and sunshine and desire. You make life changeable and beautiful and full of daily wonder.” (Yezierska 141)

More often than not, Yezierska characterizes the Anglo-Saxon romantic partners of her heroines as overly restrained, unable to feel with the same depth and generous openness as their Eastern-European counterparts. The narrator’s teacher, who also remains nameless, indirectly configuring him as universal, is no exception. Yet his humble awareness of these limitations, which he alludes to as cultural, and his gratitude for the narrator’s complementary qualities distinguish him as a representative of this stereotype that Yezierska repeatedly weaves into her body of work. The story’s heroine recognizes her bright future with this enlightened teacher and concludes the work with one joyous line: “‘The miracle!’ cried my heart; ‘the miracle of America come true!’” (Yezierska 141). To the narrator, finding love is synonymous with the capacity for happiness that America has to offer. Furthermore, by winning such coveted affection, this protagonist has the ability to shape a retreat for herself in a new homeland. Therefore she is not lost and alone on the outskirts of society any longer. Because her instructor, an American-born man equipped with the power of his membership in the mainstream society, values the heroine’s passion to learn as well as her unrestricted emotions, this story portrays one of the few successful romances in Yezierska’s collection.

A similar story structure unfolds in “How I Found America,” except that this piece culminates with the happiness of an authentic friendship, ensuring that Yezierska’s protagonist finally attains belonging after her arduous journey. Like “The Miracle,” this work is narrated by a young, Russian-Polish immigrant woman whom Yezierska avoids naming. Furthermore, she
also seeks acceptance in this new homeland, a place of escape from the brutal anti-Semitism of her former Eastern-European village. Certain of the same themes from the previous story are revisited, particularly the reception of a letter from America to urge exodus and the disappointment with this new homeland’s dismal reality at first. Yezierska tells and retells the immigrants’ shock when an idealized image, offering the only hope available, pales against the actuality of a potentially worse situation. Once this narrator arrives in New York City with her family and confronts the Lower East Side’s grime and filth, the lack of sunlight, all of the tightness of tenement life, and the natural world’s glaring absence, she feels misled:

I looked about the narrow streets of squeezed-in stores and houses, ragged clothes, dirty bedding oozing out of the windows, ash-cans and garbage cans cluttering the side-walks. A vague sadness pressed down on my heart – the first doubt of America. (Yezierska 263)

This young heroine must reconcile the America of her dreams to real life and struggles to overcome the distress that she faces. To help her parents and siblings, she immediately gets a sweatshop job and works long, monotonous hours, deepening her aggravation with this new world. At one point, she complains to her coworker about being treated like a machine in America, claiming the same feverish desire as the previous narrator: “to make from myself a person” (Yezierska 267). This calling reverberates within most every heroine Yezierska creates, a profound reflection of the author herself. In this same exchange with Yetta, the narrator asks: “Does America want only my hands – only the strength of my body – not my heart – not my feelings – my thoughts?” (Yezierska 267). This young woman yearns to contribute to her new country somehow, but feels lost at every turn.

As the story progresses, she endures multiple setbacks because of her bold willingness to
speak her mind, which only serves to alienate her further and further. From angering her boss at the sweatshop, a Jew with little regard for the effect of his abruptly lowered wages on the women workers, to irritating the benefactress at the “School for Immigrant Girls” because she wants to learn more than just cooking skills, this protagonist fails to find anyone emotionally compatible with her about America’s callous disinterest. In desperation, she releases her desires to the woman who runs this practical school for immigrants, hoping for some sort of understanding, even some guidance to make her dreams a reality:

“I came to give out all the fine things that was choked in me in Russia. I came to help America make the new world…They said, in America I could open up my heart and fly free in the air – to sing – to dance – to live – to love…Here I got all those grand things in me, and America won’t let me give nothing.” (Yezierska 282)

After opening up her soul, begging this official gatekeeper of knowledge to help her realize such a wholehearted hunger to develop herself for a higher purpose, she receives only stony indifference. On top of these personal misfortunes, her family flounders financially, which causes her mother to regret the risk they took in abandoning the Old World. As their prospects worsen and they are faced with eviction, her mother exclaims: “Why did we leave our home? We were among our own. We were people there. But what are we here? Nobodies – nobodies!” (Yezierska 286). Indeed, the mother’s remorse echoes Yezierska’s personal fear of blending into anonymity, not making something of her life. Yet another element exists in this sentiment from the narrator’s mother. She suggests that they had more dignity in their homeland. America, however, dehumanizes them because they are not even people in this heartless world, just less than nothing to the mainstream culture.

The family’s miserable situation in the tenements reinforces the narrator’s own failed efforts to find success in their new world, making America even more closed off than ever
before. With the pressure of a government social worker’s questions about their pending homelessness, the narrator feels further distress, but sets aside her self-respect to get her old job back at the sweatshop. Still, she vows to herself that this wretched workplace “shall not crush me. Only my body I must sell into slavery – not my heart – not my soul” (Yezierska 287). Like the narrator from “The Miracle,” this young woman has the inner strength to survive without losing herself or her will to demand more from life. Eventually, she attends night school, but finds the experience almost as frustrating as hard labor during the day. The books considered classics bore her because they provide no helpful insights into the experiences she endures in America. At one point, she confronts her teacher in front of the rest of the class, openly challenging why they must read The De Coverley Papers: “How can I learn from this old man that’s been dead two hundred years how to live my life?” (Yezierska 290). As with all of the clashes that the heroine engages in with authority figures, she winds up more lost and painfully isolated as a result.

Because her alienation has worsened to such a terrible degree, this despondent heroine craves some sort of warm connection to keep her from sinking further into immense sadness. She looks around in her travels throughout the Lower East Side to discover the hope of friendship:

In the street, in the cars, in the subways, I was always seeking, ceaselessly seeking, for eyes, a face, the flash of a smile that would be light in my darkness. I felt sometimes that I was only burning out my heart for a shadow, an echo, a wild dream. But I couldn’t help it. Nothing was real to me but my hope of finding a friend. (Yezierska 290)

The narrator’s desolation reaches such an extreme level that she searches even among strangers just to locate a friendly face to keep her connected, involved in the world that surrounds her. As she moves through this foreign universe, which feels so cold and dark, Yezierska’s protagonist
seeks a like-minded companion to offer understanding, an anchor to an otherwise disinterested society. Her outlook finally changes for the better when one of her sisters shares a poem by Rudyard Kipling with the story’s heroine. The narrator feels an instant joy upon reading it and wants to meet her sibling’s teacher. So she leaves work early one afternoon to make contact. “All the way to her school I prayed: ‘God – God! If I could only find one human soul that cared…’” (Yezierska 292). The lack of concern that she feels from her adopted country creates an emotional hardship so heavy that an abrupt, unannounced visit to her sister’s instructor amounts to a last resort. Fortunately, this educator offers the supportive friendliness Yezierska’s narrator needs, instantly encouraging her to release all of her emotions in a rush of long-repressed thoughts. The teacher lets this narrator express herself without judgment and simply listens:

“I’m an immigrant many years already here, but I’m still seeking America, My dream America is more far from me than it was in the old country. Always something comes between the immigrant and the American,” I went in blindly. “They see only his skin, his outside – not what’s in his heart. They don’t care if he has a heart…I wanted to find some one that would look on me – myself…I thought you’d know yourself on a person first off.” (Yezierska 293-294)

Again, a hunger to be recognized as having value intertwines in this work, where invisibility in American society had caused the narrator to feel dehumanized for so long. Her objective is to become a person, to gain the culture’s recognition that she exists and can actually contribute in some way beyond the relentless slave labor required in her sweat shop job. What’s more, the need for acknowledgment drives this heroine to find connections, to ensure her existence in a world that so harshly casts her aside as the Other. This instructor shows compassion and interest in the heroine’s desire to be heard and urges her to continue. During that key moment, the protagonist understands she has obtained her goal: “‘I have a friend,’ it sang itself in me. ‘I have a friend’” (Yezierska 297). Ultimately, she finds her destination in a newfound friendship that
secures her to this culture. Just as “The Miracle” ends with a proclamation of joy at finally achieving comprehension, a welcome end to ongoing estrangement, this work also concludes with a similar exclamation: “Through my inarticulate groping and reaching-out I had found the soul – the spirit – of America!” (Yezierska 298). By attaining a friend, the narrator has established that she now belongs in this country, too. Her accomplishment also permits the protagonist to see America in a much more positive light, moving from the darkness of her isolation to an awareness of the nation’s spirit, which she had been deprived of realizing prior to this essential fulfillment. Now she is no longer a stranger, but an integral part of this nation as well. Quite fittingly for this series of short stories, as Ellen Golub observes, Yezierska’s fundamental theme concentrates on the yearning desire, the actual hunger, to have a home in America. Golub states that Yezierska’s fiction “compels our attention for its boldness, its vitality, and its insatiability. In writing of the America she found and the way of life she left behind, Yezierska unfolds the central metaphor of her generation: hunger” (Golub 51). To be sure, Golub pinpoints the ravenous need to establish an authentic domain that Yezierska expresses with such passion in each of her stories. Belonging, feeling the cherished sensation of a genuine link to the world, and not existing in miserable isolation fuel the inherent core of Yezierska’s uninhibited stories.

While this author explores the manner in which Jewish immigrants seek sanctuary through the development of solid connections, Yezierska also scrutinizes how the overall mainstream culture mistreats these newcomers, forever thrusting them on the outskirts of society. Specifically, two of Yezierska’s short stories in this collection demonstrate the difficult landscape and cultural abuse Eastern-European Jews endured in navigating their adopted home.
The first piece titled “‘The Fat of the Land,’” winner of the 1919 Edward O'Brien Best Short Story award, inspired the anthology of Yezierska’s works published as *Hungry Hearts*. This story offers an extensive portrait of American capitalism’s alienating effect on the Judaic community, its damage to family unity through forced assimilation, and the superficiality left behind due to financial greed. Told straightforwardly through a third-person narration, this work follows the conflicted rise of Hanneh Breineh from hopeless poverty in the Jewish ghettos to supreme financial comfort in New York’s more affluent neighborhoods. With more of a focus on the mistreatment of Jewish immigrant women by local charity workers, “The Free Vacation House,” first published in 1915, developed from a true experience that one of Yezierska’s sisters encountered. While the two previously mentioned stories do not revolve around personal alienation, they are distinct in that they examine America’s social fabric and its discriminatory design toward marginal ancestries, which diverge from the Anglo-Saxon model. In that context, cultural estrangement inevitably flourishes to cause anguished divisions as Yezierska documents. Both stories extend beyond individual accounts of the search for inclusion to critique destructive social circumstances that degrade the validity of Judaic practice itself and negatively impact the collective lives of Eastern-European Jews who wish to feel at home in America.

Indeed, “‘The Fat of the Land’” provides a sweeping, critical assessment of America’s mainstream culture, illustrating the nation’s adverse values based on materialistic wealth result in a tragically fractured Jewish community. Divided into two parts, the first half of this story shows the poverty-stricken trials of Hanneh Breineh. She frequently complains to her next-door neighbor Mrs. Pelz about raising a houseful of six young children under impoverished conditions. In one notable conversation, Hanneh Breineh dissolves into hysterics as the two
friends discuss people they both knew from the Old World. Visibly upset, Hanneh Breineh claims that since she and her family moved from Poland to America, her worth as a person means nothing:

“And do you think I was a nobody in Poland?” broke in Hanneh Breineh, tears welling in her eyes as the memories of her past rushed over her. “But what’s the use of talking? In America money is everything. Who cares who my father or grandfather was in Poland? Without money I’m a living dead one. My head dries out worrying how to get for the children the eating a penny cheaper.” (Yezierska 181)

Hanneh Breineh mourns the elevation of money above all else in America. Now struggling on a day-to-day basis to feed her family with a husband who earns very little, she remembers how different existence had been in Poland, where wealth did not deeply affect every choice.

While Hanneh Breineh’s near-destitute situation justifies her misery and helplessness, Yezierska complicates this character by assigning her with a constant, melodramatic insistence to be in the spotlight and the grave abuse she inflicts on her children. In fact, Mrs. Pelz must protect her friend’s newborn baby after Hanneh Breineh viciously calls this child a “little blood-sucker,” yells at him to shut up, sticks a dirty pacifier into his mouth, and claims: “If I didn’t have this child on my neck, I could turn myself around and earn a few cents” (Yezierska 185). Horrified at her neighbor’s heartlessness, Mrs. Pelz tries to soothe Hanneh Breineh with advice that forms the foundation of this story. She urges Hanneh Breineh to be more patient with her offspring:

Mrs. Pelz sat down beside Hanneh Breineh. “Wait only till your children get old enough to go to the shop and earn money.” She consoled. “Push only through those few years while they are yet small; your sun will begin to shine; you will live on the fat of the land, when they begin to bring you in the wages each week.” (Yezierska 187)

These words predict a future Hanneh Breineh does not have the perspective to appreciate. For years, she alternates between rage and histrionics, unable to recognize that her children will
actually usher her into the financial stability Hanneh Breineh envisioned for herself ever since her arrival in America.

During the second half of this story, merely delineated by an extra space between paragraphs and appearing with the same abruptness as Hanneh Breineh’s behavior, Mrs. Pelz wanders down the prosperous Eighty-Fourth Street, hopeful to unite with her old friend. Many years have elapsed and when Hanneh Breineh opens the door, she stands before Mrs. Pelz in silk and diamonds. Instantly, Hanneh Breineh recognizes her former neighbor and expresses delight at this visit. Despite her polite reaction, Mrs. Pelz feels uncomfortable as she follows Hanneh Breineh inside. Yezierska demonstrates this awkward self-consciousness with Mrs. Pelz’s behavior upon entering the opulent home: “…Mrs. Pelz only drew her shawl more tightly around her, a keen sense of her poverty gripping her as she gazed, abashed by the luxurious wealth that shone from every corner” (Yezierska 197). The two women engage in small talk; Mrs. Pelz tells her friend that she and her husband have now moved back to Delancey Street. Hanneh Breineh expresses fondness for their old neighborhood, regretting she does not still have that warm closeness:

“Uptown here, where each lives in his own house, nobody cares if the person next door is dying or going crazy from loneliness. It ain’t anything like we used to have it in Delancey Street, when we could walk into one another’s rooms without knocking, and borrow a pinch of salt or a pot to cook in.” (Yezierska 198-199)

Hanneh Breineh’s sadness directly reflects Yezierska’s personal regret when she herself attained wealth, thereby propelling her into a fragmented world of cold distance and an absence of genuine community. Yezierska’s portrait of America for the Jewish immigrant, which comes across quite starkly within this snapshot, offers a demoralizing binary. Whether in poverty or in
wealth, happiness remains elusive in America. Connectedness and financial security do not merge, but stay at opposite ends of a hopeless spectrum, resulting in inevitable alienation.

The reality of economic insulation feels more like a suffocating prison to Hanneh Breineh, which explains the immense loneliness that she conveys to her former neighbor from the Lower East Side. Although Mrs. Pelz’s prediction years earlier blossomed into a reality, where all of Hanneh Breineh’s children have accomplished such success that they can now supply their widowed mother with an opulent life, the protagonist’s emotional misery has only intensified. Despite great wealth and household assistance to attend to her every need, Hanneh Breineh mourns her lack of friends as well as the isolating chasm that only continues to widen between herself and her children. They speak an entirely different language, carefully constructed from an assimilated embrace of America’s capitalistic society and a rejection of Hanneh Breineh’s Eastern-European culture. Furthermore, Hanneh Breineh’s children wish to shape her more into a lady, according to American standards, expressing embarrassment at their mother’s outspoken, Old World manners. But Hanneh Breineh continues to resist:

“When I was poor, I was free, and could holler and do what I like in my own house. Here I got to be still like a mouse under a broom. Between living up to my Fifth-Avenue daughter and keeping up with the servants, I am like a sinner in the next world that is thrown from one hell to another.” (Yezierska 203)

Wealth and security demand a cultural price, ensuring an agonizing estrangement between Hanneh Breineh and her children, who wish to dilute their mother’s Eastern-European ways for a more refined American sophistication. Consequently, Hanneh Breineh feels she must twist herself into someone else to exist in the secure refuge provided by her offspring. Now she feels multiple layers of alienation due to this directive to suppress her natural personality. The
unspoken pressure to restrain herself inevitably affects her relationships with her children and with an American society that remains painfully unfamiliar and desolate.

Although Hanneh Breineh capably explains the source of her despondency, Yezierska adds greater dimension to this troubled estrangement by building upon the heroine’s own melodramatic and abusive tendencies. An overwrought argument with her daughter Fanny at the end of this story hurls Hanneh Breineh out of the fancy Riverside Drive apartment where they both now live. Their vicious fight centers on her isolation and the lack of love that she feels. Fanny responds without remorse and expresses rage at Hanneh Breineh’s harsh treatment of family members during their dysfunctional childhood with her “everlasting cursing and yelling that we were gluttons” (Yezierska 217). Fanny’s recollection offers an accurate portrait of her mother’s behavior, but Hanneh Breineh refuses to hear it and escapes to Delancey Street, begging Mrs. Pelz to stay the night. She tells her alarmed friend from the ghettos: “My heart is dying in me like in a prison” (Yezierska 218). Mrs. Pelz and her husband are mystified that a woman with numerous resources at her disposal could be so unhappy. Since they still struggle to live in a meager home, the couple cannot comprehend the invisible forces that have unified to cause Hanneh Breineh’s wretchedness and desire to abandon her riches for poverty once more. Because of Hanneh Breineh’s customary histrionics, which the couple witnessed for so many years, they conclude that she fled due to her history of emotional disturbances: “They saw the Hanneh Breineh of old, ever discontented, ever complaining even in the midst of riches and plenty” (Yezierska 220). The redundancy of Hanneh Breineh’s annoying complaints and chronic melodramas conceal the reprehensible truth. Since America’s mainstream culture discourages diversity, rejecting the inclusion of other ethnicities within its capitalistic structure, prosperity
can only occur through the full acceptance of Anglo-Saxon dominance, which becomes Hanneh Breineh’s living nightmare.

In the end, she determines no other option exists except to return to total dependency on her children because the unsavory poverty of the ghetto would mean losing luxurious conveniences, but Hanneh Breineh still feels lost and alone. She returns to the apartment building defeated, murmuring, “the fat of the land” and cries as an emotionless doorman lets her inside. The alienation and acquiescence during these last moments of the story are palpable because of the utter helplessness ahead. It is feasible that Hanneh Breineh’s fiery personality will only continue to become muted as she dissolves into the flattened aura of affluence that surrounds her. Yezierska foreshadows the unavoidable torture of this once proud Jewish immigrant losing her identity. Alongside the torment, she cannot obtain any understanding from those around her because of the mainstream culture’s appealing as well as misleading surface of economical comfort. Therefore, her complaints, however valid, seem out of place and simply reflective of an established self-centeredness that cannot appreciate the exorbitant wealth she has obtained.

This same ruse of contentment and tranquility, which masks ethnic intolerance while fostering profound alienation, formulate the core of Yezierska’s short story “The Free Vacation House.” As a whole, this piece offers an uneasy and often problematic glimpse into the dominant culture’s condescension toward impoverished Jewish immigrant mothers. Deliberately written to emulate her sister’s voice in broken, emotional English, Yezierska conveys the powerlessness Eastern-European immigrants feel at America’s indifference toward their deplorable living conditions. In Delia Caparoso Konzett’s opinion, Yezierska integrates her sister’s voice into the narrative to position this heroine as an important representative of the Jewish immigrant
experience. In addition, Yezierska’s decision directly confronts the government’s inhumanity toward newcomers:

Yezierska's painstaking effort to reproduce her sister's language demonstrates that *Hungry Hearts* aimed to foreground the active appropriation of American culture by immigrants before it fell under the control of national and social regulation. Immigrants, Yezierska attempted to show, possessed social agency and did not have to be treated as second-class citizens in need of social reform. (Konzett 606)

To Konzett, Yezierska empowers this protagonist’s personal expressiveness to symbolize the worth of Jewish immigrants, which rises above America’s social repression. Therefore, the heroine finds herself thrust from an intolerant system that refuses to recognize her worth. In the process, Yezierska shows the injustice of society’s insistence on forcing this narrator to conform to the Anglo-Saxon American culture. From the first sentence, Yezierska’s protagonist launches into her story as if unleashing suppressed feelings. With a narrative reminiscent of an eager conversation, the story begins by jumping right into the issue at hand: “How came it that I went to the free vacation house was like this: One day the visiting teacher from the school comes to find out for why don’t I get the children ready for school in time; for why are they so often late” (Yezierska 97). These opening lines set the scene for an unexpected journey that the protagonist had imagined would be a respite from her hectic, poverty-stricken life, not governmental intrusion, humiliating judgment, and open prejudice.

Days after the visiting teacher offers this immigrant mother time away at no cost, a representative from the Social Betterment Society imposes on the family with an abundance of meddlesome questions that imply incompetence and reflect cultural bigotry. Alarmed, the narrator discovers this organization is a charity and objects to the official, who has made herself comfortable in this heroine’s home: “‘Ain’t the charities those who help beggars out? I ain’t no
beggar. I’m not asking for no charity. My husband, he works” (Yezierska 100). But the charity worker appears to ignore Yezierska’s protagonist, introducing a swirl of unwanted bureaucracy into the family’s world. Although this narrator does not have to pay anything to enjoy the promised vacation house, she endures an unspoken mental price while marched from one office to the next in long lines with other immigrant women identified as applicants for the getaway. After an obligatory visit to a doctor, the narrator finds herself clustered with mothers like her and following a nurse out on the street: “I kept down my eyes and held down my head and I felt like sinking into the sidewalk. All the time I was trembling for fear somebody what knows me might yet pass and see me” (Yezierska 104). The protagonist feels mortified at this treatment simply for expressing casual interest in a cost-free vacation and not realizing the emotional price involved.

When she finally passes all of the shame-inducing steps to qualify for this stay, the story’s narrator feels delight at the lovely scenery that surrounds her while traveling on the train, which contrasts with the compressed dirtiness of her ghetto neighborhood. The sight fills her with awe:

I looked out from the window and instead of seeing the iron fire-escapes with garbage cans and bedclothes, that I always seen when from my flat I looked – instead of seeing only walls and wash-lines between walls, I saw the blue sky, and green grass and trees and flowers (Yezierska 105)

After living in such overcrowded and depressingly stark circumstances for so long, the protagonist absorbs the openness of the natural beauty outside with appreciation that also contains shock. Her surprise at this magnificence demonstrates the extent of her neighborhood’s demoralizing poverty, which she had accepted as normal. Indirectly, Yezierska uses her narrator’s observations to highlight the anti-Semitic mistreatment of Jewish immigrants, where they are forced to live in horrendous conditions by the American government. Like her wonder at
the beauty of America’s natural world, the story’s heroine expresses pure astonishment as she and her group arrive at the vacation house. Colorful flowers, comfortable chairs, and shady trees decorate the grounds. The interior offers a similar sense of care in its design and meticulous maintenance. Indeed, the obvious cleanliness strikes this narrator above everything else as she observes the floors’ impressive white shine and the lack of even a speck of dust anywhere. Later that day, a representative from the charity lays out the house rules, which virtually exclude the immigrant women from taking full advantage of the accommodations. These restrictions ensure that the house’s front rooms are pristine for guests. Essentially, the Jewish women immigrants staying for the week must remain hidden and silent as much as possible, which, the narrator soon discovers, involves a specific reason:

On every few days there came to the house swell ladies in automobiles. It was for them that the front from the house had to be always perfect. For them was all the beautiful smelling flowers. For them the front porch, the front sitting room, and the easy stairs with the carpet on it. (Yezierska 110)

As the heroine watches these rich women come to the house, enjoying full access in tours led by charity workers, the distinctive class hierarchies come into upsetting focus. These wealthy ladies are not confined to any one place in the house. Also, they are able to walk freely to the back and see the immigrant women lined up on benches as if jailed. The protagonist experiences utter dehumanization at these embarrassing displays: “I was always feeling cheap like dirt, and mad that I had to be there, when they smiled down on us” (Yezierska 111). Used as a prop and subject to such condescension, she wishes to escape from this demeaning social exchange disguised as thoughtful generosity. At one point, the narrator even hears one of the affluent visitors exclaim: “‘How nice for these poor creatures to have a restful place like this’” (Yezierska 111). This patronizing condescension, which situates the Jewish immigrant guests as inferior, illustrates
Yezierska’s judgment of government charities, according to Delia Caparoso Konzett’s analysis. Konzett argues that “Yezierska's works routinely criticize the goals and methods of reform institutions, attacking their philanthropy and liberalism as a means of preserving established social and cultural hierarchies” (Konzett 597). By pretending to care through such half-hearted efforts, those in power can feel more complacent about maintaining their authority, thereby solidifying the systemic structure, without fear of justifiable revolts from the lower classes. Based on this treatment, Yezierska’s heroine realizes that she and the other immigrant women are simply animals to be pitied by the inspecting socialites, part of a show likely to justify their benevolent donations. The stay at this vacation house feels more like a fundraising campaign than actual outreach. What’s more, the vacation, in name only, has a definite cost attached to the Jewish women immigrants lured into this appealing trap, further defining their societal alienation and Otherness. Because of the resulting powerlessness and the experience of incredible debasement, Yezierska’s protagonist cannot wait to enter her own home again. Despite its cramped dirtiness and lack of splendor, she feels elated to have her freedom back again:

When I got back in my home, so happy and thankful I was I could cry from thankfulness. How good it was feeling for me to be able to move around my own house, like I pleased. I was always kicking that my rooms was small and narrow, but now my small rooms seemed to grow so big like the park. I looked out from my window on the fire-escapes, full with bedding and garbage cans, and on the wash-lines full with the clothes. All these ugly things was grand in my eyes. Even the high brick walls all around made me feel like a bird what just jumped out from a cage. And I cried out, “Gott sei dank! Gott sei dank!” (Yezierska 113)

Like Hanneh Breineh, this narrator learns that cleanliness and elegance are not always what they seem. They can shroud hideous truths such as the real purpose behind this vacation, which served to animalize the immigrant mothers, turning them into a show to benefit the charity, not to offer these overworked women an authentic time to rest from their impoverished lives.
Nonetheless, the narrator returns to her own congested space with more perspective and a newfound appreciation of her personal independence despite the strain of undeniable poverty. In the world of the Eastern-European Jewish woman as portrayed by Yezierska, financial comfort can ironically translate to even more intensive, prison-like circumstances than indigence itself, which magnifies the alienation inherent to this adopted homeland.

Many of the same complicated themes and critical observations of cultural alienation that Yezierska’s diverse collection Hungry Hearts explores in the perennial search for belonging also weave through her most celebrated and best known novel Bread Givers (1925). Krystyn R. Moon sums up the novel’s most crucial themes:

Specifically, Bread Givers addresses five phenomena relevant to U.S. immigration history: the experiences of Jewish immigrant women, intergenerational conflict within immigrant households, poverty in the tenements of new York City, Americanization, and whiteness and Jewish identity. (Moon 75)

Moon’s analysis presents the complex issues Yezierska’s autobiographical heroine confronts in this saga of alienation and desire to assimilate. Told from the first-person perspective of Sara Smolinksy, this semi-autobiographical work of fiction examines multiple layers of religious, patriarchal, and societal estrangement that Jewish women immigrants often endured in early twentieth-century America. Indeed, in Sara’s bold refusal to acquiesce to her patriarchal father’s demand that she respect the prescribed boundaries of traditional Jewish women, Yezierska presents an indirectly feminist account of Judaic womanhood and its painful complexities. She demonstrates the restrictions that young women faced when Old World Jewish values superseded a more modern society and the emotional sacrifices necessary from Judaic womanhood to seize

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19 Moon’s 2010 article titled “The Gift of the Bread Givers” looks at Yezierska’s novel from an instructional standpoint. She discusses using this work of fiction to teach undergraduate history courses and its value in understanding the definition of American identity at the start of the twentieth century.
personal control. Furthermore, Yezierska illustrates the harsh misunderstanding, oppression, and anguished rejection that awaited outside the family home in mainstream America, where anti-Semitic attitudes only deepen an already fractured identity, requiring even greater resolve and inner strength to overcome. Much like a personal journal, Sara chronicles her journey from a spirited, first-generation Jewish-American child of immigrant parents to an independent young woman who insists upon an education despite her family’s disapproval to an elementary school teacher in control of her own life while still attached to her Judaic past.

From the early years of her youth, Sara comprehends the massive inequality that her three older sisters, her mother, and herself must accept from the tyrannical father, a purposefully unemployed Talmudic scholar, who rules over their impoverished and quite miserable household. In the opening pages of the novel, Sara explains how the mother had to abandon many of her treasured possessions from Eastern Europe when the family moved to America because all of the father’s holy books were more important to preserve. Whenever this topic would arise in any number of the couple’s bitter arguments, the father routinely laughed at her agony. Claiming that her prized belongings could be easily replaced, he asserted: “…my books, my holy books always were, and always will be, the light of the world. You’ll see yet how all America will come to my feet to learn’” (Yezierska 9). In addition to viewing himself as the family’s most consequential member, the father confidently feels his books matter more than anything else. He even monopolizes an entire room to store his many texts in an already cramped apartment that must house six people. The family’s comfort does not factor as a priority to him at all. While Sara describes these troubled dynamics, she reveals that if her mother had provided the family with a son, this child would have been allowed to share the home’s most preeminent
space alongside the father. But since the family only contains daughters, the father alone has access to this apartment’s most spacious room. In a matter-of-fact tone, which feels almost numb from generations of compliance, Sara describes why Jewish women generally tolerated such secondary treatment:

Heaven and the next world were only for men. Women could get into Heaven because they were wives and daughters of men. Women had no brains for the study of God’s Torah, but they could be the servants of men who studied the Torah. Only if they cooked for the men and washed for the men, and didn’t nag or curse the men out of their homes; only if they let the men study the Torah in peace, then, maybe, they could push themselves into Heaven with the men, to wait on them there. And so, since men were the only people who counted with God, Father not only had the best room for himself, for his study and prayers, but also the best eating of the house. The fat from the soup and the top from the milk went always to him (Yezierska 9-10)

The Smolinsky household silently accepts this oppression against its own best interests in this confined and uncomfortable home, adhering to tradition without dispute. Despite the parents’ periodic fights during particularly strained moments of familial tension, the father always prevails because he represents holy wisdom and the teachings of God. By providing this cultural information, which then merges with a hierarchical sense of the father’s power, Yezierska shows the unbalanced yet resilient system that Sara must navigate and, eventually, reject.

The novel’s first half features Sara at the approximate age of ten, where she has enough distance from her father’s despotism to witness all three of her older sisters transition to arranged marriages that inevitably lead to terrible loneliness. As the parents discuss prospects for these young women, each of whom works to help the household financially survive, Sara’s mother feels concerned about not having dowries to offer potential husbands. But the family patriarch, insulated from any economic worries because he himself has no job or a real awareness of living
costs, refuses to believe any disadvantage exists. He dismisses his wife’s worries with characteristic arrogance and disrespect:

“Woman! Stay in your place!” His strong hand pushed her away from him. “You’re smart enough to bargain with the fish peddler. But I’m the head of this family. I give my daughters brains enough to marry when their time comes, without the worry of a dowry.” (Yezierska 13)

Although Sara’s father lacks a concrete understanding of money because of the misogynistic shield that permits him to study the Torah without any family responsibilities, this patriarch refuses to defer to his wife’s practical knowledge. The mother’s womanhood automatically makes her a subordinate, even though she and her grown daughters manage all of the household details without the father’s input or guidance.

Over a series of chapters, Yezierska shows the Smolinsky sisters’ capacity to attract appropriate mates for themselves in hopeful, even joyous, relationships, only to fall victim to the father’s autocratic interference, inevitably causing emotional division. Because these potential spouses, for various, self-serving reasons, do not meet the patriarch’s requirements to provide him with continuous financial support, he hampers these once favorable possibilities. One by one, Sara watches as Reb Smolinsky interferes with his daughters’ choices and disrupts their lives. The sisters defer to his patriarchal authority at the cost of their own happiness. But Sara decides that she will not allow him to intervene:

I began to feel I was different from my sisters. They couldn’t stand Father’s preaching any more than I, but they could suffer to listen to him, like dutiful children who honour and obey and respect their father, whether they like him or not. If they ever had times when they hated Father, they were too frightened of themselves to confess their hate. (Yezierska 65)

Instead of conforming to the predictable demands Sara has already observed, where Reb
Smołinsky would undoubtedly dehumanize her into an economic instrument to ensure his lifestyle of religious study, Sara decides not to comply. In addition, Yezierska’s heroine becomes increasingly adamant that her father will not obstruct the goals she has set for herself: "More and more I began to think inside myself, I don’t want to sell herring for the rest of my days. I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people" (Yezierska 66). By resolving to separate herself in this manner from familial expectations, Sara pinpoints a dysfunctionality within her home that contains an inherent and an undeniable alienation. While women and girls are traditionally oppressed according to conventional Judaic practice, the Smolinsky household appears to be afflicted by an exceptional sexism for the father behaves with an intense strictness that lacks any affection whatsoever. Furthermore, Sara’s firm decision to avoid marriage in favor of a direction of greater fulfillment opens the door for a different form of estrangement that she has not encountered yet. But leaving the known security of her home to enter mainstream American culture without the buffer of family will lead to an isolation Sara does not have the experience to anticipate yet.

Still, as she watches each of her sisters eventually submit to their father’s unsuitable choices for spouses, where emotional connectedness and compatibility have no role, Sara feels even more determined to leave this household. Through Sara’s eyes, Yezierska shows Reb Smolinsky’s ethical emptiness as he values the material wealth of his future sons-in-law over emotional compatibility with his daughters. In addition, she demonstrates that supposed religious knowledge and years of scholarly work do not always indicate morality or empathic parental instincts. Although the father forced poorly selected mates on two of his daughters at this point in the novel, he claims a victim status once Sara’s mother informs them that the household now
earns less income with fewer wage earners in the family. His response illustrates a patriarchal arrogance merged with religious superiority:

“With one son-in-law a diamond dealer and another a cloaks-and-suits manufacturer I ought to have at least one man’s meal a day. If I were a butcher, a baker, a thickneck, a money-maker, if I did less for my children, then maybe they would have done more for me. But from the day they were born, I held up for them the flame of the Holy Torah. It was I, my brains, my knowledge of the world, that brought them such golden luck marriages – and see their gratitude!” (Yezierska 82)

The father’s fury reveals his calculation. By contriving marriages for his daughters based on monetary merits, Reb Smolinsky assumes that he will also benefit financially. The self-righteous claims of religious goodness come across as an obvious attempt to justify a self-centered rationale. Based on the oppressive, even cruel, behavior that Sara observes, her fierce desire to leave the household long before Reb Smolinsky attempts to profit from an ill-conceived marital gamble with her future makes logical sense.

The opportunity for Sara’s departure occurs abruptly after her eldest sister’s resigned consent to a loveless union with an older, widowed fish peddler, setting up Yezierska’s narrator to enter an American culture indifferent to her distressed circumstances. Sara’s hasty escape follows the substantial loss of money her father had previously negotiated for this final arranged marriage. Financially inexperienced and unable to detect fraudulent schemes, he purchases a grocery store on impulse without consulting his wife, who had begged him to involve her in the discussions, and they become even more impoverished than before. Now saddled with a storefront that contains empty boxes of goods, the mother applies her resourcefulness in the marketplace to gain some products on credit and keep their investment afloat. Helpless and humiliated, the father largely stays uninvolved with his wife’s skilled bargaining. Yet he then explodes at Sara as the tension within the family becomes unbearable, setting the heroine’s
decision to flee in immediate and irreversible motion. When her father demands that she stay, Sara defies him: “‘I’ve got to live my own life. It’s enough that Mother and the others lived for you’” (Yezierska 137). Refusing to withstand her father’s abuse any longer and eager to take control of her existence, Sara packs up her meager possessions and sets out on her own. With this abrupt decision, she must confront a broader indifference in the world outside an unaffectionate home ruled by an autocrat.

As Sara comes to term with her newfound independence, the second half of the novel begins, where she engages with American society primarily alone, encountering an alienation even more isolating and intensive than her troubled family household. Similar to her numerous stories on this momentous entrance into mainstream America after years of familial and religious oppression, Yezierska explores Sara’s imminent estrangement within this more expansive yet still intolerant society. Sara loyal follows in the footsteps of Yezierska’s preceding heroines who also focus on obtaining an education, only to become outcasts as a result. Furthermore, Sara’s refusal to accept ingrained Judaic expectations and, instead, pursue an individualized education, rejecting the expected family life, set her apart. She keenly feels this difference and mourns the lack of warm connections. At her laundry job, where Sara studies textbooks for her night school classes during lunch, she endures mockery from her peers. This sting of rejection deeply pains her and she wishes to join with the other young women: “I longed to throw myself at the feet of the girls and cry out to them. ‘Say anything you like. Do anything you like. All right – hurt me. But don’t leave me out. I don’t want to be left out!’” (Yezierska 180). Unable to connect with her coworkers, who ridicule Sara’s drive to attend classes at night, she discovers the same derision from the students in her courses. Because Yezierska’s heroine, who greatly
resembles the author in an unstoppable need to learn, asks innumerable questions and wants so passionately to develop her mind, Sara annoys her classmates, which, again, she senses with sadness:

Even in school I suffered, because I was not like the rest. I irritated the teachers, stopping the lessons with my questions. A bored weariness fell over the whole class the minute I started to speak. They’d begin to nudge each other by the sleeve and whisper, “Oh, Lord! That bug! Again showing off her smartness!” They didn’t hunger and thirst for knowledge, they weren’t excited about anything they were learning, so it jarred on them that I was so excited. To them I was only a selfish grabber of their time because I was so crazy to know too much. (Yezierska 181)

The world feels cold and quite hostile to Sara, who, like Yezierska herself, longs to grow. But because she cannot find others who share this passion, her isolation deepens. Again and again, Sara encounters this excruciating failure to connect, even after one of her sisters introduces her to Max, a lively, affectionate, Jewish business man, whom she almost marries. But as Sara spends more time with him, she realizes their incompatibility could never be resolved, mostly because he talks so much about himself and does not show interest in her dreams. “To him, a wife would only be another piece of property. I grew cold at the thought how near I had been to marrying him” (Yezierska 199-200). Yezierska paints a universe afflicted by superficiality, where obtaining great wealth amounts to the most prominent life goal. Even as Sara interacts with other Jewish immigrants around her, many of whom come from the same Eastern European background as herself, she finds that their values and her own do not coincide in any meaningful way. Yezierska implies that the elevation of money above all else, even the quest for personal development, plays an instrumental part in Sara’s continual estrangement within the dominant American culture. To make matters worse, Sara’s father travels from the family store outside the city back to the Lower East Side solely to reprimand her for rejecting Max’s marriage proposal.
He shows no regard for her reasons or doubts about merging her life with Max, only condemnation for a refusal of assured economic comfort, a quality he treasures above all else.

Once he angrily marches off, Sara feels lonelier and more isolated than ever before:

I knew now that I was alone. I had to give up the dreams of any understanding from Father as I had to give up the longing for love from Max Goldstein. Those two experiences made me clear to myself. Knowledge was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. I had made my choice. And now I had to pay the price. So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me. No father. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go on – alone. (Yezierska 208)

Lonely solitude and sadness remain a constant theme throughout Sara’s coming of age, where she cannot connect with those around her despite valiant efforts to make meaningful contact.

Both the inner circle of her family and the larger American culture are sources of terrible estrangement principally because Sara wishes to obtain knowledge more than adhering to traditions set for young Jewish-American women of her era. The fact that she selects knowledge as a priority above marriage and family sets her apart in ways that invite a profound alienation on complex levels, which Sara does not know how to resolve.

Despite this discouraging isolation, Sara pushes herself forward into new, potentially difficult circumstances when she receives acceptance into a university outside of New York to earn her college degree. Immediately, she feels different from the other students and self-conscious with her “gray pushcart clothes against the beautiful gay colours and the fine things those young girls wore” (Yezierska 212). Observing her peers, Sara feels a sad separation from them and marvels at how they appear so foreign to her, even more mystifying to understand than perfect strangers in her former neighborhood of Hester Street. She asks: “Wasn’t there some secret something that would open us toward one another?” (Yezierska 214). Always an outsider
in every setting, she struggles to build relationships and bridge these unspoken gaps between herself and other members of the freshman class entering college life with her. One night, Sara decides to attend an on-campus dance for incoming students to end the ache of her loneliness. In spite of not owning an evening gown or slippers, she decides to fasten a fresh collar onto her blue serge dress before walking to the elaborately decorated gymnasium. But Sara only feels more humiliated and alone from this devastating experience:

The whirling joy went on and on, and still I sat there watching, cold, lifeless, like a lost ghost. I was nothing and nobody. It was worse than being ignored. Worse than being an outcast. I simply didn’t belong. I had no existence in their young eyes. I wanted to run and hide myself but fear and pride nailed me against the wall. (Yezierska 219)

A number of detrimental realizations collide in this passage, where Sara most keenly sees herself as the Other within her new home, a place of knowledge she has worked with such tireless dedication to reach. Reinforcing Yezierska’s greatest fear, Sara concludes her invisibility at this dance confirms her status as nothing, a nobody. Therefore, she just does not have a rightful place in this world of intellectual advancement. Its promise of knowledge and warm associations are not extended to her. Sara feels more alienated than any other setting that she has encountered thus far in her young adult life.

Like her work at the laundry shop and night school courses in New York, where Sara endured her constant position on the outside, Yezierska’s protagonist continues to feel separated and unable to unite with those around her on campus. After four years of study, however, Sara makes one warm acquaintanceship. Older and established, a dean at the university opens his home to her and shares details of his family life. Specifically he tells Sara about his grandmother, who had exhibited the courageous spirit to build a home in the middle of the wilderness. In his
reflections, he admits to Sara that he did not possess the same fearless will to sustain himself as his ancestor. But he views Sara as a different type of person altogether: “But you, child – your place is with the pioneers. And you’re going to survive” (Yezierska 232). This rare yet treasured moment of connection, where someone representing great influence articulates the promise that he sees in Sara, infuses her with a new, even more determined hope and positivity. The triumph and sense of accomplishment that fuels Sara, enabling her to return to New York with self-assurance, quickly dissipates into the all-too-familiar misery, dysfunction, and division. She feels an ache to reunite with her family, to be at home with these relatives again, yet worries about the estrangement that has been an unstated wedge between them:

As I got ready to make my first visit home, I began to wonder what had happened to Father, Mother, and sisters in those six years that I was away. Would I find them changed? Would they understand that my silent aloofness for so long had been a necessity and not selfish indifference? (Yezierska 242)

Although Sara’s past experiences with her family prove the validity of this years-long distance, the novel’s heroine still worries that she will be viewed as inconsiderate by not making contact sooner. Cultural guilt at the perception of not adopting the traditional role as caregiver overrides the reality of her own mistreatment. Ironically, Sara’s professional life as an elementary school teacher, situated in the broader American culture, contains much more harmony than her reunion with relatives. While Yezierska never explores the possibility within Sara’s consciousness, the reality that this heroine has successfully assimilated into American society could explain her fractured relationships to a family that still adheres to Old World, oppressive principles. When Sara reunites with her family, the brokenness further worsens. She almost immediately witnesses the death of her ailing mother, the family’s soul and its only true source of parental concern, and
watches her father’s descent into inevitable helplessness. Now educated, equipped with greater freedom and a worldly wisdom her older sisters lack, Sara assumes control. She enters a new phase in her relationship with the sheltered authoritarian who still demands control over the Smolinsky family. Within the novel’s final pages, Yezierska compresses a great deal of action, particularly with Reb Smolinsky’s strident misjudgment and impulsivity. Not even a month after the mother’s death, he marries Mrs. Feinstein, the widowed upstairs neighbor whom Sara and her sisters view as an abusive and conniving predator. In contrast, Sara finds genuine love with Hugo Seelig, the Jewish principal of her school who shares her immigrant background and even comes from the same Eastern-European region as her own family. This warm connection represents a paradox of sorts because Sara meets Hugo in mainstream America, not through family members or the tight-knit Lower East Side community. Instead, Sara encounters Hugo through her professional life, offering an enriched cognizance she never achieves from her blood relatives.

Furthermore, Sara discovers she can create her own home in America without any familial support, designing a personal place of refuge that alleviates her ever-present alienation. This secure space now links her to the difficult, often apathetic society she has navigated and mastered by herself. When Sara invites Hugo to her room, the only guest to enter this sanctuary, she feels a welcome catharsis at opening up her private corner of the world: “How great it felt to break my long loneliness and warm up my home with another presence. I lit the lamp under the tea kettle for the first time for two instead of one” (Yezierska 277). Sara’s oneness with Hugo marks her most uplifting attachment. She does not face a solitary future in a disconnected society anymore, left to handle multiple layers of estrangement alone.

Yezierska contrasts Sara’s profound joy at finding this worthy partner to alleviate the
alienation with Reb Smolinsky’s absolute inability to take care himself and create a stable home. His impetuous choice of an inappropriate second wife points to a complex combination of arrogance and innocence. Throughout the novel, he continually demonstrates poor instincts concerning practical matters, relying on the family’s women to repair his mistakes while disparaging them as inferior to his masculine authority at the same time. As always, Reb Smolinsky equates women with instruments to carry out his desires and obscures these motives under the cover of sacred Judaic practice. Indeed, the reckless choice to remarry is no exception: “I have to have my own house and someone to take care of me. It says in the Torah, a man must have a wife to keep himself pure, otherwise his eyes are tempted by evil” (Yezierska 259). The superiority that he displays, where his spouse exists as only a utilitarian extension to fulfill his own needs, however, only masks his vulnerability. By illustrating Sara’s persistent resourcefulness in the larger American culture as the antithesis to her father’s ineptitude, Yezierska offers a ferocious critique of Old World Judaic beliefs. This oppressive system actively impedes women from reaching their potential while also fracturing familial relationships. Jewish womanhood is thus left to choose between pursuing individual dreams or maintaining supportive connections to their families, which inevitably leads to an anguished alienation.

In the end, Sara introduces Hugo to her father, uniting the two complicated worlds of her existence – mainstream American culture and Eastern-European tradition - with the fervent hope of finally achieving wholeness. But the novel’s conclusion, which some scholars view as too simplistic, actually embodies a disturbed complexity for it does not anticipate happiness or an end to Sara’s solitude. Gay Wilentz agrees with this assessment and even singles out critics such
as Alice Kessler-Harris who “see the ending as too pat, too happy-ever-after to be believable; they do not see the conflicts in the novel appropriately resolved by the neatly packaged ending” (Wilentz 39). Wilentz points out that the supposed reconciliation is far more complicated than certain thinkers acknowledge. While the novel’s conclusion initially seems to unite the independent daughter and autocratic patriarch together, underlying emotional intricacies that forever divide these family members still hover with a toxic power beneath the surface. As an example, when Sara and her father are alone for a few minutes during this visit, she realizes his utter helplessness at the hands of a savage wife and invites Reb Smolinsky to move in with her. Yet Sara’s father does not respond with gratitude. Instead, he displays a sense of religious supremacy over his concerned daughter. In fact, he accuses Sara of adopting a Christian identity because of her Judaic “carelessness” and then haughtily attempts to extract a promise that she will “keep sacred all that is sacred to me” before agreeing to her generous offer (Yezierska 295). The father’s tyrannical response and refusal to appreciate her hospitable gesture inspire Sara’s hatred until she considers “the pathos of this lonely old man” and his obstinacy to stay so rigidly the same in his traditions despite the evolving world around him (Yezierska 295). In spite of Sara’s decision to view her father’s behavior with pity, the reality reveals an even darker side of this man. Although Reb Smolinsky cloaks himself in Judaic holiness, repeatedly referring to the Torah as a justification for his sexist cruelty, he does not possess the empathy and compassion that Sara exhibits. Yezierska’s protagonist recognizes a despondency in Reb Smolinsky that Sara herself endured, though without the support she willingly proposes to her father out of kindness and familial loyalty.

The novel closes with Sara and Hugo leaving her father’s apartment as they discuss his
imminent transition into their home, forming a new family that will officially merge the heroine’s separate lives. But as the couple departs, Sara can hear her father chanting from the Bible: “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” (Yezierska 296). These words predict a difficult and quite unaffectionate future ahead with Reb Smolinsky in the pair’s household. Furthermore, just as her father’s voice fades into the distance, Sara feels overcome with dread. Her sense likely relates to the reality of returning to a difficult existence with an authoritarian father: “But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me” (Yezierska 297). While Sara initially succeeded in defying misogynistic cultural traditions designed to extinguish her individual identity and entangle her to family obligations, she finds herself engulfed by Old World expectations nevertheless. Yezierska’s conclusion suggests that despite all of Sara’s efforts to separate herself from the oppressive patriarchal rule of Judaic culture, the protagonist’s Old World context and familial ties lead her back to the conventional, deliberately restrictive existence of Jewish womanhood. Unfortunately, the advancements she has achieved cannot be sustained within a religious system designed to suppress Jewish women’s independence. This means Sara faces a bleak future of estrangement within the culture of her birth and further distorted by an extremist father, heightening the complicated alienation she could never quite overcome on a journey to achieve a refuge of her own in America.

Indeed, Yezierska’s novel ends with immense regret, foreshadowing an unresolved alienation that will undoubtedly haunt this protagonist as the future unfolds within this new home. Wilentz sees a dissonance in Sara’s progress toward Americanization as the novel comes to a close. She argues:
As a persona for the author Yezierska, Sara's experience reflects the dis-ease that Yezierska felt in her adopted land. As an immigrant daughter of America, Yezierska did manage for a time to fulfill her goal for success in America, yet as an alien and a Jew, she was never accepted into that world as an equal. (Wilentz 39)

According to Wilentz’s reading, Sara, like Yezierska, endures a struggle for equality, perhaps even legitimacy. Through the chronic conflicts with her father, Sara never feels accepted, but suspended without a genuine space of belonging. Her father refuses to revise his view of Sara and continues to see the daughter he has consistently derided, despite her accomplishments, as inferior to him due to gender alone. Such treatment cannot help but foster deep-rooted isolation and anger.

In a sense, Reb Smolinsky might be seen to represent a world that keeps Sara at the margins no matter how often she proves herself as deserving of inclusion, which only perpetuates the estrangement. Ruth Bienstock Anolik adds another dimension to Sara’s inescapable alienation, observing that this future household will be dominated by men, reducing the emotional comprehension women can offer each other. She observes:

…at the beginning of her narrative Sara lives in a household of women speaking a variety of transgressive and mediating languages, the narrative ends with the prospect of Sara living with her father and husband in a household in which only standard English or Hebrew will be spoken. This will, indeed, be a family that speaks the same language. However, family harmony will be accomplished at the expense of the rich cacophony of female speech. (Anolik 22)

Without the understanding that shared womanhood offers, Sara will inevitably suffer from an isolation inherent to missing a connection she possessed in her family home. Therefore, on numerous levels, Sara’s detachment will unavoidably continue, though in a different form. Potentially, she might face a doubling of the oppression her father had imposed because now she will reside with two male figures socialized in Judaic practice, not just one. Overall, Yezierska
demonstrates that despite this family reunion of sorts, the personal alienation and discomfort in the search for sanctuary never quite fades, but resurfaces in other forms that require analysis and an ultimate resistance.

Throughout Anzia Yeziorska’s extensive body of work, she repeatedly explores how Jewish immigrant women seek belonging in their adopted homeland to transcend complex layers of cultural division. In order to understand this challenging experience, which Yeziorska herself endured, she weaves many of the same relevant and often dysfunctional themes into her semi-autobiographical fiction. Specifically, Yeziorska examines the misogynistic Otherness at the foundation of Judaic practice that magnifies the emotional isolation Eastern European Jewish women feel during their quest to join American society. In the face of multiple levels of oppression, where intrinsic, religious sexism and America’s ethnic intolerance converge, Yeziorska demonstrates the passionate resourcefulness of her heroines, authentic incarnations of herself, to triumph over formidable obstacles and discover the personal space of their adopted sanctuary. Each fictional piece contains a framework that enables Yeziorska’s determined protagonist to reconfigure her life according to American standards, frequently revealing the fractures of cultural divisions that result. Yet Yeziorska’s outsider status served as an empowering vehicle to write with empathic force about the barriers Jewish immigrant women necessarily confront as they adapt to and embrace the foreign, routinely callous universe that has become their permanent home. Indeed, Yeziorska inspires a vivid awareness of Jewish immigrant women’s rights, passionately bringing their valid perspectives to life and depicting the injustice of their exclusion from the full breadth of Judaic practice as well as American society. Her bold, lively, and outspoken collection of stories and novels illustrates that America, with its
rich array of opportunities, should be accessible to all without threat of cultural estrangement to Jewish immigrant women who envision active involvement in the larger community. What’s more, when Jewish women can contribute their abilities to the complex private and public spheres, American culture as a whole benefits from this impassioned dedication. Ultimately, Yezierska argues that allowing Eastern-European Jewish women to create an inclusive homeland in the United States fosters a profound revision of the American Dream. Through an acceptance of Jewish women immigrants, this act implicitly lifts restrictions on every population’s desire to belong and, therefore, embraces all of the diverse cultures that wish to call America home.
CHAPTER TWO:

DOROTHY PARKER’S EMOTIONAL SEARCH FOR CULTURAL BELONGING

While Anzia Yezierska engaged in an open, lifelong campaign to secure acceptance within the American culture through her autobiographical fiction, Dorothy Rothschild Parker never endured such a struggle. In fact, Parker enjoyed notable advantages of family prosperity and literary connections that were denied to Yezierska. Yet both authors shared Jewish ancestry and a significant connection to the Lower East Side's sweatshop industry, though from opposite ends of the nation's class system. Parker's father, a second-generation German Jew, held prominent positions in the city's garment manufacturing business, which enabled his family to live on the Upper West Side. Furthermore, Parker's initial career as a staff writer for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* provided her with automatic publishing credentials and networking benefits, perfectly foreshadowing her literary success. In spite of her economic and social privilege, however, Parker's favorable reception came at a significant emotional cost, opening the door to relentless battles of a different sort. In order to attain the influential approval of her peers, Parker reconfigured herself to overcome invisible feelings of otherness. Concealing her Judaic heritage, which had existed as a mystifying yet unmentioned obstacle within her family, Parker largely ignored the religious identity issues that originated in her childhood and continued to haunt her as an adult. Instead, she constructed a strong persona built upon clever barbs to disguise her vulnerability. But beneath the veneer of tough, feminist independence and the witty wisecracks
that drew public admiration, where she could comfortably interact with male powerhouse authors as an equal, Parker pieced together a fragile existence always on the verge of self-destruction. Complex factors such as the continual suppression of her roots, an avoidance of escalating mental health issues, and a severe addiction to alcohol converged to create the profound cultural alienation that ultimately became too massive for Parker to handle. As a tragic consequence, she did not find an authentic place to belong, despite her sustained search for sanctuary in the highly competitive world of publishing that defined her. Despite these immense hurdles, she still rose to become a ground-breaking author in the twentieth century, successfully channeling her complicated experiences of disconnection into sharp, meaningful works that are relevant to this day. In addition, through Parker's sophisticated treatment of satire, she helped to verbalize a feminist perspective while also demonstrating the essential value of sentimentalism in modern American literature.

Although Parker never obtained the nourishing support she envisioned to ease her personal pain, she generated an empathic yet often satirical collection of stories and poems that contemplates often-undetectable feelings of estrangement. Emotional isolation and the perpetual failure to obtain inclusion fueled the underlying anguish reflected in Parker's work. Furthermore, the confusing inconsistency of Parker's religious upbringing may also account for much of her inner battles. In essence, because she never developed a stable kinship to ground her, the absence of an ancestral infrastructure deprived Parker from ever obtaining a fully connected family history as well as a cultural understanding of her own heritage. Though Parker refrains from delving into any religious themes in her body of work, general desolation and questions of
morality infuse her writings to construct the intricate landscape of alienation at the core of her subject matter. The estrangement that she personally experienced, an inherent consequence of her own religious uncertainty, manifests itself in a profound otherness, which remains an unwavering presence woven into her short stories and poetry. To cope with the emotional vacuum that emerges from her dispossession, Parker incorporates sentimentality into her writings, adding a humanity absent from America's early transition to modern literature. Numerous contemporary critics have noted Parker's integration of sentiment, where she offsets the detached style that characterizes modernism by entwining emotion within her texts. Yet Parker's brand of sensitivity never veers into the saccharine because she applies a steady layer of sardonic humor to temper any risk of exaggerated feeling. The result is a skillful balance of compassion and shrewdness in Parker's narrative tone that reflects her introspective outlook on otherness in all its bewildering complexity.

Even Parker's entry into life inspired the author to write about this moment with her customary blend of irony and fervor, in which she half-seriously protests against her exclusion as a legitimate New Yorker. Born on August 22, 1893 in West End, New Jersey, Parker always lamented the location of her birth, setting a persistent foundation for her sense of not belonging. Since she eventually rose to become the embodiment of New York City through edgy articles and theater reviews in *Vanity Fair* as well as successive short stories, poems, and plays, among other important works, Parker regretted that her family happened to be on vacation from their West 72nd home during her premature birth. According to biographer Barry Day, Parker even wrote in 1921 that she felt “‘cheated out of the distinction of being a native New Yorker’” (Day
In this same piece, Parker concedes that the family's return to the city just after Labor Day during her birth year showed that she “nearly made the grade” (Day 3), revealing her characteristic humor. Yet Day still describes this biographical fact as a “bone of personal contention” on Parker's part as she neared her thirties (Day 3). In addition to this grievance, Parker found it difficult to reconcile her spiritual origins. Born to a Jewish father Jacob Henry Rothschild and a Protestant mother Eliza (Marston) Rothschild of Scottish descent, Parker never experienced a consistent religious identity. This absence of spiritual stability occurred not only because of her parents' interfaith marriage, but due to unexpected family tragedies. When Parker reached the age of five, her mother suffered from a sudden illness of severe diarrhea and died. Only months later, her father met another Christian woman, also a former schoolteacher like Eliza Rothschild, and remarried. Unfortunately for Parker, her stepmother Eleanor Frances Lewis lacked maternal instincts and pressed her devout Roman Catholic beliefs on the Rothschild children. Consequently, Parker endured a strict stint of convent schooling with forced recitals of daily prayers by Lewis, whom she hated and refused to acknowledge as her new mother.

The youngest of the four Rothschild siblings, Parker had the least amount of religious knowledge prior to Lewis's intensive imposition of Catholicism on the family, but she felt the most estranged by the circumstances. To express her displeasure, Parker routinely mocked New York City's Blessed Sacrament Academy private parochial school, a well-regarded educational institution that she attended with her popular, more well-adjusted older sister Helen. Biographer Marion Meade claims that Parker found the concept of the Immaculate Conception to be

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1 Day's 2004 book *Dorothy Parker: In Her Own Words* is the closest to an autobiography that exists from Dorothy Parker. He brings together an extensive arrangement of actual quotes by Parker throughout her life and writing career that offer a fascinating portrait of her experiences.
suspicious and described it as "spontaneous combustion" (Meade 15). This play on words amused Parker and she found her resistance to be a crafty mode of survival. Such antics helped cement her school-wide reputation as a troublemaker, where her behavior allegedly contributed to one of the instructor's eventual breakdowns. During a 1956 interview that Parker gave The Paris Review, she spoke in raw, critical terms about this unhappy experience. In Parker's estimation, this parochial education did little to prepare her for any successful interactions with the world. Quite plainly, Parker argued that this training supplied her with just one useful skill: “the convent taught me only that if you spit on a pencil eraser it will erase ink” (Capron 1956). Based on Parker's own assessment, her Catholic education did not provide the intended outcome of an adherence to the religion's principles. Eventually, the institution dismissed her for what it viewed as behavioral issues. Day states that “Mr. Rothschild was asked to remove his daughter forthwith from the consecrated ground” (Day 6). Although Parker did display evident hostility, refusing to comply with the nuns' teachings, she gained one significant benefit from the school. Through this institution, Parker developed an eager commitment to independent reading. She

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2 Meade is considered the official biographer of Dorothy Parker. Her 1987 book Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This? comprehensively chronicles Parker's life, including her extensive personal and professional relationships as well as her full array of published and unpublished works, in great detail. Because of her extensive research into Parker's life, she discovered that the author's ashes had been in a Manhattan lawyer's cabinet drawer for almost twenty years. Meade's efforts brought attention to this oversight, starting a lengthy journey of Parker's remains. Since Parker had left her literary estate to Martin Luther King, Jr, her ashes were given to the N.A.A.C.P after the civil rights leader's death. In 1988, Parker's ashes were shipped to Baltimore and interred in a grassy area behind the N.A.A.C.P.'s offices. Then in 2006, the organization decided to move its headquarters to Washington, D.C. A professional tour guide and Parker fan who wrote A Journey into Dorothy Parker's New York (2005) named Kevin C. Fitzpatrick discovered the organization's plans and took it upon himself to find a new place for the author's remains. He even arranged to have the rabbi who attended the original burial in Baltimore to say Kaddish (a Judaic prayer for the dead) when Parker's ashes were exumed. Fitzpatrick coordinated with Parker's grandnieces in central New York and took care of all of the legal details so that Parker could be buried again fourteen years later, on her birthday, in the Bronx's Woodlawn Cemetery.

3 This interview titled “Dorothy Parker, The Art of Fiction No. 13” was conducted by Marion Capron at Parker's New York City hotel room, where the acclaimed writer resided at the time. Parker discusses a wide array of topics about her life as well as her approach to writing.
immersed herself in books, especially consuming sophisticated and satirical literature, which helped inspire her future writing career.

Despite this valuable introduction to literary works, Parker always felt as if she were an outsider at school and suffered from a severe depression that only evolved with more intensity into her adult years. Parker's keen sense of emotionally existing on the margins as well as her indirect search for compassion continued to develop while also contributing to the fiction and poetry she generated. As a child, Parker had no available outlet to guide her through the logical rage and wretched confusion inspired by the Catholic education forced upon her. Prior to Lewis's sudden arrival in the family, Parker and her siblings had never encountered this religion or such strict teachings before. Until Lewis assumed a parental role, Parker's only real exposure to religion involved interactions with the Jewish relatives on her father's side. Though Parker did not receive a formal Judaic education, she witnessed the open, expressive cultural side of this religion through family events, which offered a striking contrast to the Catholic academy. During this period of Parker's life, she lacked a sense of connection to both ethnicities, identifying as an outsider with each religion and only further deepening her unstated, quite isolated otherness. Perhaps if Parker felt embraced by one of these faiths instead of existing along the fringes, she might have established a spiritual affinity. However, this sense of inclusion never occurred during her upbringing. Therefore, Meade's claim that Parker “had no intention of belonging” (Meade 15) in the Blessed Sacrament Academy explains the author's mindset at the time. Unlike her sister Helen, Parker refused to accept any aspect of the Catholic culture and completely rejected the nuns' teachings. Frank Jackson regards Parker's compelled enrollment in this strict private school as a damaging facet of her problematic childhood. He states that Parker “was
something of a lost soul seeking sanctuary inside a hard shell” (Jackson 36). Even at this young age, Parker applied an aggressive layer of bravado to mask her feelings and maintained a resistant exterior. It is an approach she regularly employed throughout her life to cope with powerful sentiments. Parker used this strategy to bypass the appearance of any weakness as she continuously tried to seek understanding for herself in the world.

Just three years into Parker's mandatory education in Roman Catholic doctrine, this chapter of her religious estrangement swerved to an unanticipated halt. Parker awoke one morning in April of 1903 to learn of Lewis's unexpected death due to an acute cerebral hemorrhage. The abrupt passings of both Parker's biological mother and her stepmother within such a short period of time caused immense anguish as well as a shock that reverberated through her youth. Meade describes these distressing experiences as key to Parker's mental outlook and a profound influence on the way she viewed herself during her progression from the preteen years into adulthood:

The sudden deaths of Eliza and Eleanor became the twin traumas of her early life, her ticket to self-pity, a passe-partout to self-hatred and an unalterable conviction that she deserved punishment - the source of the negativity with which she grappled so unhappily - and so happily - thereafter. Reaffirmed was her perception of the world as a horrible place where people keeled over and died without warning. Nature had no right to be so mean. (Meade 16)

In fact, the terrible circumstances served to advance Parker's incessant worries about abandonment and isolation, which she never overcame. At a young age, Parker concluded she

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4 Jackson's 2018 article “Dorothy [Parker] Does Dallas” specifically looks at a play she cowrote with a former love interest named Ross Evans in 1948 titled *The Coast of Illyria*. It is a notable effort because she had not pursued playwriting in the previous twenty-five years, though Parker always wished to be successful in this genre. While she felt hopeful about this 1949 production in Dallas, the play never became a hit. Sadly, Parker did not achieve great reviews for her playwriting endeavors as a whole, though she made several attempts throughout her career to produce a Broadway hit within this format.
had somehow provoked the deaths that resulted in this maternal desertion. Therefore, Parker endured immense guilt because of this theory that she internalized, negatively affecting every close relationship in the future. Day confirms Parker's anxiety within his characterization of this upsetting period of her childhood. He explains that based on Parker's mistaken reasoning “the ten-year-old Dorothy had two ‘murders’ on her conscience” (Day 5), partially justifying the absence of affectionate mothers in the short story writer's subsequent body of work. These early experiences could also provide helpful insight into Parker's preference for the general company of men over friendships with women.

While Lewis's death effectively excused Parker from additional Catholic studies, the author's troubled relationship with religion moved in yet another disconcerting direction, which only complicated her estrangement. Parker's father enrolled her in a finishing school called Miss Dana's, located thirty miles away in Morristown, New Jersey. In order for Parker to be admitted into this educational institution, mostly populated by Christian students, Rothschild fabricated his daughter's religious background. The Jewish Women's Archive website devotes a lengthy page to Dorothy Parker in its online Encyclopedia and discusses this troubling facet of the author's life: “Henry Rothschild told the school authorities that his daughter was Episcopalian, but her dark Jewishness marked her as an outsider. She would always maintain this image of herself, and in the face of early alienation and many disappointments, she developed a biting and irreverent sense of humor” (Itzkovitz 2009).5 Indeed, her father's deception only underscored

5 The Jewish Women's Archive offers an extensive online Encyclopedia. Its profiles of important Jewish women are detailed and provide thoughtful analyses of these prominent figures' various contributions to Judaism and American culture in general. In addition, each entry is individually written by contributing authors. The essay about Dorothy Parker is written by Daniel Itzkovitz, an associate professor of English and expert on Jewish studies who edited two books about Parker contemporary Fannie Hurst.
Parker's inability to fit into the school's mainstream culture, further sealing her outsider status. In a succinct summary of Parker's difficult primary and secondary educational experiences, Stuart Y. Silverstein directly associates her alienation to religion. He states:

If she intuitively felt isolated from her world, the schools she attended made her feel worse. At a time when a Rothschild was a Jew and was treated accordingly, Dorothy was enrolled first in a Catholic elementary school, where she had trouble with the nuns, and then a restricted Protestant high school (her father lied on the application). She left the high school six months later, when she was fourteen, and did not return. (Silverstein 12)

Essentially, Silverstein points out that Parker's schooling, which embodied a religious emphasis, exacerbated her loneliness. The Catholic and Protestant institutions placed Parker in untenable situations where she had to be dishonest about her actual ethnic heritage. Therefore, Parker could never reveal her true identity, causing her to feel shame and self-esteem issues that the parental figures in her life either never recognized or simply neglected to address. As a result, Parker's assumptions about her otherness only deepened over time. Both Itzkovitz and Silverstein furnish crucial insights that decipher the dominant reasons for Parker's estrangement, which mainly evolved from attempts to assimilate her in different schools. The theories that Itzkovitz and Silverstein describe definitively illustrate that the repeated denial of Parker's Jewish heredity generated psychological repercussions.

As Silverstein observes, Parker departed from Miss Dana's at the age of fourteen, constructively ending her turmoil as an eternal outsider, but the Rothschild family provided no explanation for her withdrawal. Meade claims that once Parker abandoned Miss Dana's the following March after her enrollment, she never attended another school again. In addition,

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Silverstein is the author of the 1996 book titled *Not Much Fun: The Lost Poems of Dorothy Parker*. Containing more than one hundred poems that Parker viewed as inferior and refused to publish, Silverstein provides anecdotes and analysis of the author's poetic works.
Meade notes that while Miss Dana's offered a solid education, the institution did not attempt to embrace Parker or help her feel more at home at the school. Though she avoided discussing this phase of her life or ever representing the experience in narrative form, the fact that she had to mislead the school about her true religious identity, further augmenting her otherness, likely accelerated Parker's exit. Interestingly, Meade adds new dimension to her portrait of Parker by describing how the author handled questions about her education after her rise to become a famous writer:

As an adult, upon request only, she would list her educational credits as Blessed Sacrament and Miss Dana's, careful not to specify that she had graduated from neither. In the company of close friends she was quick to bury the subject with a joke and say that she had "carried the daily chain in the college of hard knocks." It was her best camouflaged deprivation. The sole time she publicly alluded to the fact that she never finished high school was when she remarked to a newspaper reporter while a visiting professor at California State College, "Because of circumstances, I didn’t finish high school. But, by God, I read." (Meade 27-28)

Even when she transformed herself into a New York celebrity author, Parker hid her outsider's existence with great care, relying on humor to mask this permanent insecurity. Knowing that she would be judged negatively for admitting to a limited education, Parker used her sharp wit to defuse any tension and dance around the issue. But during the one instance where she did ultimately acknowledge her educational deficiency, via cultural standards, Parker provided a valid argument as justification. Her voracious reading, which began during Parker's parochial school years and never ceased, could feasibly be viewed as the equivalent of a formal education. Indeed, Parker's evident self-discipline in studying a diverse range of literature shines in her writing through the sophisticated use of language, the various references to classic works and established authors as well as the apparent gift for telling meaningful, timeless stories that captivate with their unique blend of humor and empathy.
Parker's graceful sidestepping of intrusive questions and her proficient use of quips designed to distract emerged from her survival of a childhood that cultivated perplexing identity issues as well as an all-encompassing alienation. The unfortunate source of these problems can likely be identified as the one stable parent in Parker's adolescence. Although Henry Rothschild, by most accounts, had Parker's welfare in mind whenever he made choices that affected her, his instinct to suppress her Judaic heritage through deceptive assimilation triggered lifelong shame and confusion. Meade implies that Rothschild himself tried to escape his own Jewishness by purposefully selecting Christian spouses, which offers some insight into how Parker inherited this troubled attitude. Delving even deeper, Meade explains Rothschild's personal feelings toward his ancestry and provides a psychological view on his choice to reject Judaism. This history supplies an overall picture to illuminate Rothschild's vision for Parker and her older sister:

He preferred to marry superior women, which for him meant primarily Christian and only secondarily a woman with sufficient intelligence to earn a living as a teacher...For his daughters, he invested in first-class Catholic educations, which, he hoped, would ensure a predictable outcome: marriage into wealthy Christian families. (Meade 19)

Based on the way of thinking that Meade presents, Rothschild believed that ignoring his Jewish roots and, by extension, that of his children, better positioned the family for successful lives of financial contentment. In reality, though, Rothschild generated an atmosphere of extensive estrangement and emotional damage that negatively impacted both of his daughters. While Helen Rothschild could adapt with more ease and possessed greater domestic inclinations than her younger sister, she endured multiple difficult marriages to Christian men. For Parker's part, she wed a total of three times to two men and also chose unsuitable spouses. Yet Parker did not
entirely avoid Judaic ties since her second husband possessed Jewish ancestry as well. Still, Henry Rothschild's example and viewpoint, which reflected anti-Semitic beliefs, however subtle, especially harmed Parker, the more sensitive of his two daughters. Largely due to his behavior and actions, Parker never felt comfortable with her own ethnic identity and always struggled to find a favorable place where she could fit into the world, turning to addictions of various forms for solace.

Not only did Rothschild essentially reject his and his children's Judaic heritage, he exacerbated the alienated climate of his household by elevating Christianity above Judaism through his marriages. Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams notes that Parker struggled with her ethnicity on a number of levels and Rothschild's deliberate selection of Christian spouses reinforced her personal misgivings. “Parker's religious and ethnic identity was further complicated by the death of her mother...and the remarriage of her father to a strict Catholic school teacher who helped raise Parker and her three siblings” (Fuchs-Abrams 92). By choosing a Catholic teacher as his second wife, Rothschild constricted his children's connection to their Judaic heritage. The tendency to promote one religion over the other does occur in the majority of interfaith unions, primarily causing Jewish traditions to be the suppressed of the two faiths. With this predisposition in mind, it is logical to conclude that such favoritism could generate uncertainty and self-doubt in children of mixed descents that include Judaism. Yet very few studies currently examine how the conscious reduction of Judaic practices in interfaith families affects children's mental health, short-term and long-term. But the available data does suggest some troubling facts.

Fuchs-Abrams’s 2009 book Literature of New York features a biography of Parker as well as analyses of her short stories.
Indeed, the scholarly work suggests individuals from family units of multiple religions may encounter problems with important human experiences that include feeling connected to the world around them, developing strong bonds, and enjoying general life satisfaction. For instance, Richard J. Petts and Chris Knoester offer important revelations that relate to the clashes Parker likely experienced within her household as well as provide further insight into her eventual substance abuse to alleviate severe depression. In their study, Petts and Knoester analyzed the results of a poll titled “National Survey of Families and Households” conducted from 1987 to 1988, where they scrutinized same-faith and interfaith marriages through the context of childhood contentment. In order to accomplish their purpose to appraise “the impact of having parents of dissimilar faiths on children's well-being” (Petts and Knoester 373), the scholars examined the benefits of religion, comparing the parenting approaches of same-faith and interfaith couples. Petts and Knoester found that children raised in religiously homogamous families are more apt to follow theological teachings, thrive in school, and avoid legal trouble. Accordingly, the opposite is true of children lacking a solid religious foundation and with parents who are not in total agreement as well as actively involved in consistent spiritual teachings. The study's authors state:

To the extent that children from religiously heterogamous families lack these controls due to weak religious ties, they may be more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Wallace and Williams 1997), resulting in lower levels of well-being. (Petts and Knoester 375)

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8 Petts and Knoester's 2007 article titled “Parents' Religious Heterogamy and Children's Well-Being” provides a thoughtful analysis of the way interfaith unions affect children in these households. Its purpose is to study how the presence of more than one faith in a family unit can impact the offspring. The researchers believe that families without a cohesive religious foundation, where the parents do not share the same religious vision, produce children who are more at risk for lower levels of life satisfaction, higher levels of conflict, attempted suicides, and delinquency. A number of these characteristics apply to Parker's struggles, both during her childhood and adult years. It is feasible that the complex religiously heterogamous nature of her nuclear family was a basis for the problems Parker confronted, which offered few resolutions at the time beyond writing about her feelings of otherness and self-medicating with alcohol.
The conclusions drawn by Petts and Knoester apply to Parker's experience on numerous fronts. While her Catholic stepmother powerfully steered Parker and her siblings into a parochial education, the family's Judaic roots were never addressed. This omission, perhaps a deliberate avoidance, left an essential aspect of the children's identity unsettled, removing any religious coherence and unity. According to the limited documentation available, no evidence exists that Rothschild participated in his children's Catholic training, which further supports the absence of uniform clarity within the siblings' religious education. These factors are the perfect ingredients for the extensive alienation that Parker endured and her subsequent self-destructive behaviors during adulthood that include substance abuse and multiple suicide attempts.

In addition to the crucial analysis by Petts and Knoester that helps explain Parker's spiritual estrangement, researcher Uzi Rebhun sheds a precise light on serious issues of Jewish identity that the literary celebrity quite feasibly experienced. Rebhun looks at statistics at the beginning of the 1990s that suggest a rapid growth of Jews marrying a non-Jewish spouse without any form of conversion over a significant span of time. Although this period does not encompass the years when Rothschild married his gentile spouses, Rebhun indicates that the interfaith marital trend had been steadily building prior to the 1990s. Therefore, Rothschild's interfaith marriages might be viewed as part of a larger cultural pattern. In addition to pointing out the prevalence of intermarriage, Rebhun explains the societal rationale behind Jewish individuals routinely marrying outside religious borders, which bolsters Meade's theories about Rothschild's attraction to Christian women. According to Rebhun, there are practical motives of social consequence behind a Jewish person's decision to wed outside the faith: “Among the most significant factors affecting Jewish marriage patterns are socioeconomic upward mobility,
including high levels of educational attainment and professionalization” (Rebhun 72).¹⁹ Rebhun's description demonstrates that Rothschild chose spouses from the mainstream Christian culture for reasons that plausibly included social advancement.

Even more relevant to cultural alienation, Rebhun examines the intrinsic differences between a Jewish individual marrying a Protestant versus a Catholic spouse and the substantial impact on Judaic practice. The researcher's analysis is especially fitting where Parker's religious estrangement is concerned because her biological mother and her stepmother were each a member of the two Christian denominations Rebhun studies in his investigation of Jewish identification within interfaith unions. Interestingly, Rebhun claims that intermarriages of Jews to Protestants cause less erosion to the Judaic identity of the Jewish spouse than if the Christian partner is Catholic. This finding particularly highlights Parker's difficult experience with her stepmother Eleanor Frances Lewis, who compelled a Catholic education for the Rothschild children. Furthermore, based on Rebhun's research, it is probable that Lewis discouraged any adherence to Judaic practice, which likely caused the children to feel shame and confusion concerning the Jewish mixture inherent to their identities. Indeed, Parker never overcame her view of herself as an outsider, where her visible ethnicity caused her to stand out as different from the other children, and she rebelled against the strict Catholic teachings at every turn. Sadly, had Eliza Rothschild lived, Parker might have achieved a healthier relationship with her Judaic heritage, even the ability to embrace this facet of her identity, because of her birth

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⁹ Dr. Uzi Rebhun is a demographer based in Jerusalem whose research focuses on various aspects of American Jewry as well as the population of Israel. Marriage and family as well as religious and ethnic identification are some of the primary areas that he studies. His 1999 article “Jewish Identification in Intermarriage: Does a Spouse's Religion (Catholic vs. Protestant) Matter?” and his 2004 article “Jewish Identity in America: Structural Analyses of Attitudes and Behaviors” both provide useful information in understanding the evolution of Parker's estrangement as a Jew of mixed heritage.
mother's membership in a less rigid form of Christianity. To clarify the profound contrasts between Jewish-Protestant and Jewish-Catholic intermarriage, Rebhun states:

...it is now further suggested that there are far-reaching implications if the spouse is Catholic - both in terms of the distancing from Jewish commitments and the more intensive filtering of elements of a different faith into their lifestyle. From the Jewish group point of view, Jewish-Protestant marriages are less “damaging” than Jewish-Catholic marriages because, in the former, conversion rates to Judaism are higher and the Jewish spouse maintains higher organizational and social involvement. These behavioral patterns result in two quite different groups of intermarried Jews. Although intermarried Jews (to Catholics or to Protestants) do not necessarily relinquish their Jewish identification, it is clear that intermarriage has a weakening effect on Jewish identification and that the Jewish-Catholic marriage presents stronger barriers against Jewish practices, opening up greater possibilities for contradictions between Jewish group belonging and the exposure to non-Jewish religious rituals. In Protestant marriages, the specific components of Jewish identification and practices are more likely to survive. These differences among the intermarrieds enrich the religious mosaic of the American society, and at the same time also enhance the confusion and complexity of the various religious identities existing within it. (Rebhun 86)

Rebhun draws crucial conclusions about interfaith marriages, which warrant detailed scrutiny in the context of Parker's unstable religious upbringing and the predictable spiritual alienation that emerged within her as a result. In light of Rebhun's determinations, Parker's constant, agonizing sense of otherness could have evolved from the interfaith dynamics of her father's second marriage, where her Jewish roots were, in all probability, subjugated in evident favor of stringent Catholicism. Rebhun's final statement, which acknowledges the positive enrichment of society due to the overall diversity of intermarried families, also identifies the natural doubts stemming from the wide array of religious mixes that the individuals impacted by these interfaith unions experience. Parker herself suffered from the denial of a considerable component of her cultural character. She did not fully feel at peace with her own ethnicity until the end of her life, long after it complicated her interactions with the world around her.
In addition to the predictable suppression of Judaism in his intermarriage to Lewis, Rothschild's dismissal of Judaic practice, however subtle, may have amplified Parker's feelings of estrangement. Even as her father indirectly expressed disdain for the family's Judaic roots, Parker and her siblings had regular exposure to their Jewish relatives. Therefore, the children were positioned on the edge of both Jewish and Christian cultures, given access to each one yet never truly identifying with either religion. Though only snippets of information exist on Parker's interactions with the Jewish side of her family, she did have contact, particularly during her childhood. Meade characterizes these events as a source of embarrassment for the young Parker.

In describing Parker's extended Jewish family, Meade portrays a tight-knit group of relatives who had lively, boisterous personalities and interacted with expressive animation. They enjoyed loud conversations that involved sharing funny stories, arguing, and laughing while eating meals together. This high-spirited closeness felt uncomfortable to Parker, causing her estrangement from these family members. According to Meade, Parker judged this side of her family quite harshly: “To Dorothy, her relatives were absurd, noisy figures, 'silly stock' whom she shrank from acknowledging as part of her emotional geography. As an adult, she was careful to speak quietly and regally, possibly so that no one would ever mistake her for a Rothschild” (Meade 10-11). Perhaps her father's contempt for his Jewish background contributed to Parker's mindset, where she could develop the detachment to distance herself from this extended family and not view these relatives as connected to her. Environmental factors such as her father's distant affiliation with Judaism and her own misgivings about her Jewish family might help broaden an understanding of Parker's own conflicts. These were elements that Parker never discussed.
beyond famously quipping that if she ever wrote her autobiography, it would be titled *Mongrel* because of her mixed ethnic heritage.

Rothschild's death in 1913 marked the beginning stages of Parker's personal reinvention, where she created a facade that masked her ethnic history of confused isolation and shame with an aura of feminine strength and empathy. In addition to her lifelong identity issues, which Rothschild's actions only amplified, Parker had struggled with her father's profession, further complicating their relationship. According to Meade, Rothschild misrepresented the sweatshop industry's brutality on the Lower East Side while courting buyers during his career in the garment manufacturing business. An established, second-generation German Jew himself, Rothschild did not advocate for the welfare of Jewish immigrants, employees in the same impoverished circumstances as Anzia Yezierska and her family, who endured the inhumane conditions he condoned. Rothschild's actions inspired Parker to question his decency while heightening her identification with and sympathy toward otherness. This empathy for the marginalized would become a prominent theme in Parker's writing as well as her subsequent involvement in various social causes years later.

To be sure, Parker identified much more profoundly with the powerless who were cast aside in society than with her own family's prominence and the influence it wielded over New York City's business world. In fact, once she became a literary sensation, Parker regularly distanced herself from the Rothschild surname when interviewed.\(^\text{10}\) Offering clarity on this topic,

\(^\text{10}\) Numerous summaries of Parker's life, especially online, allude to the writer's tendency to deny her link to the Rothschild family. Encyclopedia.com's entry about Parker includes an unattributed quote from her that states: "No, dear, not those Rothschilds." The site publicdomainreview.org contains an article titled “When Dorothy Parker Got Fired from *Vanity Fair*” by Jonathan Goldman, which describes Parker's refusal to associate with the Rothschild name. Goldman writes that the mention of her surname caused Parker to “protest any relation to the Rothschild lineage.”
Kevin C. Fitzpatrick describes Parker's complex connection to first-generation Jewish immigrants, which the famous author did not chronicle in her works or even discuss. Fitzpatrick particularly focuses on Henry Rothschild and the sweatshop element in Parker's childhood history:

> Although the Rothschilds, who were second-generation Americans, may not have felt much affinity for the newcomers from Europe overflowing the tenements on the Lower East Side, the newly arrived masses provided a dependable workforce. Some went to work for Henry Rothschild's garment business; others were employed as the family's household help. Dorothy never described what it was like inside her father's factory, but the use of sweatshop labor was so widespread that the working conditions there were quite likely poor and the pay minimal. (Fitzpatrick 12)

Accounts such as Fitzpatrick's illustrate Parker's serious misgivings about Rothschild's attitude toward sweatshop workers and the conditions they were forced to withstand. Some reports about this parental relationship even describe Parker as detesting her father and accusing him of child abuse. Meade rejects these allegations, depicting the father-daughter connection as one that contained affection and support. In researching Parker's childhood, Meade studied letters between Rothschild and his daughters, which chronicle a tender-hearted parenting style:

> ...he exudes warmth, humor, and generosity, and his affection for Dorothy cuts like a warm stream across the middle of her childhood. His idea of childrearing owed little to his second wife, little perhaps to his first either. He was far from being a disciplinarian. In his household, children were indulged - in return he expected them

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11 As stated in a previous footnote, Kevin C. Fitzpatrick took a primary role in finding an eternal resting place for Parker's remains when they were about to be uprooted from the N.A.A.C.P.’s headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland. He has also written about Parker's life and work. This quotation comes from his 2005 book titled *A Journey into Dorothy Parker's New York*.

12 Similar to the claims that Parker denied her relation to the famous Rothschild family, certain Internet summaries also portray this author as having a hateful relationship with her father. Some sites such as thoughtco.com and radioswissjazz.ch even state that Parker said Rothschild abused her. It could be that Parker made these accusations in different conversations or interviews, which she often gave upon becoming a New York literary celebrity. Based on Meade's criticisms of Parker as someone prone to exaggerate for effect as well as for sympathy, it is possible that the author did not recount her relationship with Rothschild accurately. However, because not many intricate details are available about Parker's childhood beyond Meade's comprehensive biography, there could be some truth to these troubling aspects as presented in the shortened summaries.
to "get ahead." Feelings, negative as well as positive, could be spoken of openly. Eccentricities, too, appear to have been tolerated, even appreciated if they were amusing. Expressions of needs was encouraged. He told them that if they ever needed money, "do not fail to ask for it, and they did not fail. He was lavish with the word love, fond of playful teasing, an admirer of peppery behavior, and tolerant of scenes, because he himself was given to emotional extravagance. His was, above all, a house of much laughter. (Meade 21)

Meade's portrait of Rothschild demonstrates that this relationship may have embodied much more dimension than the author herself apparently ever admitted. It is feasible that Parker's feelings of isolation and otherness in her youth distorted how she interpreted assorted signals, including the realities of her closest relationships. Yet Meade offers a divergent reading of Parker's potential motivations for painting her father in such an unfavorable light. Indeed, Meade's overall tone reflects far less patience or compassion toward Parker. In fact, she contradicts a characterization that Parker adopted upon Rothschild's death. According to Meade, Parker viewed herself as an orphan without sufficient funds or any defense against a brutal society. Although Meade can only theorize, she refutes Parker's assertion and states: “It seems probable that much of Henry’s fortune had melted through speculations, but it was unlikely he had left her penniless” (Meade 30). In other words, even though Parker did need to determine next steps after her father's passing, it is doubtful that Rothschild neglected to provide some sort of financial means for his twenty-year-old daughter under the circumstances.

Whether or not Parker endured mistreatment from her father, she did face the traumatic prospect of shaping a new life for herself alone and overcoming her identification as an outsider to succeed in this endeavor. It appears that Parker viewed Rothschild's passing as a chance for renewal, to discard complex contempt and guilt in order to construct a fresh start. She took advantage of this opportunity with an eager focus on her writing, where she expressed her strong
opinions through eloquent honesty. After publishing “Any Porch,” a satirical, nine-stanza poem about entitled Connecticut women, which *Vanity Fair* purchased for twelve dollars in 1914, Parker pursued employment at the magazine. Months later, after she campaigned editor Frank Crowninshield for a job, he eventually assigned her a position at *Vogue*, the magazine's sister publication. This pivotal moment in Parker's life provided the pathway to her subsequent literary stardom. When Parker took this pivotal step, she “passed out of her father’s refracted world and stepped onto the stage of the real *Vanity Fair*, where all wares seemed to be for sale, all trophies inevitable, all her silvered daydreams made real” (Meade 34). Now Parker could be her own person, supposedly breaking free from the walls of her isolation to seek a nurturing place for herself in the world.

However, despite Parker's resolve to walk away from her past as an outsider, the author's family background followed her into this new chapter. It also provided Parker with a verbal ability that helped her advance at the magazine. While she had always bristled at her Jewish relatives' raucous, animated behavior, their skillful wisecracks and witticisms were part of Parker's genetic makeup, which supplied the future author with great conversational prowess. This natural comfort with face-to-face wordplay, though, did not fully flourish until Parker developed an artistic circle of trusted friends a few years later. In the meantime, her capacity for sharp retorts and quick-witted rebuttals translated seamlessly into her writing. Those skills attracted readers to her colloquial, often satirical sophistication. According to Angela Weaver, Parker's singular style situated her as both an objective investigator and a sarcastic critic of the media's unattainable ideals of American womanhood. “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” (Weaver 25). In Parker's view, women deserved to understand the restrictions imposed on them in clear, entertaining terms, even if the magazine itself shared responsibility in causing this offense. Artfully applying her outsider's lens, Parker's articles and essays disparage the industry that employed her and empower women to see through the capitalistic advertisements that simplify a woman's potential to rigid stereotypes while claiming to be more progressive at the same time. Weaver explains Parker sardonically points out that American women can never obtain genuine happiness and contentment if they consent to the magazine market's unrealistic and sexist standards. “Into this contradictory maelstrom of messages, Dorothy Parker entered with a satiric journalist-observer aesthetic, and she directed her investigative critiques at everything from current hair treatments to the Women's Pages” (Weaver 27). Parker's commentary apparently resonated because readers were drawn to her.

Furthermore, since Parker demonstrated a natural instinct for attracting the upper-class female audience of *Vogue* through her sarcasm, successfully positioning herself as a sardonic bystander, the magazine's leadership regarded her work with enthusiasm. But Parker's derisive verse titled “Women: A Hate Song” took her status at the magazine to a whole other level of admiration, despite the piece's controversial content. In this poem, consisting of sixty-two straightforward lines, Parker boldly and plainly attacks the various clichés of women celebrated in the media. Without apology, her poem bursts open with the lines: “I hate women / They get on

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13 Weaver's 2010 article “‘Such a Congenial Little Circle’: Dorothy Parker and the Early-Twentieth Century Magazine Market” specifically focuses on how Parker's career in the magazine industry prepared her for writing satirical narratives. Weaver also suggests that Parker's articles were feminist in nature, encouraging women readers to be aware of the limited identities American culture offered them. According to Weaver, Parker wanted her female readers to know that their images of ideal womanhood were constricted by social constructs and could never be achieved. By understanding rigid gender roles, women could then demand change and find fulfilling alternatives.
my Nerves” (Parker 1-2).\(^{14}\) Parker then proceeds to list the numerous stereotypes, attacking those women who are immersed in domestic concerns above all else, criticizing others who cannot control their over dramatic emotions, and mocking another group that insists on a victim status in every situation, among her humorous litany of complaints. The satirical piece concludes with the same unmistakably sarcastic ire as it begins, even repeating the identical opening lines: “I sometimes yearn to kill them. / Any jury would acquit me. I hate women. / They get on my Nerves” (Parker 60-62). Once Crowninshield, the magazine editor widely known as “Crownie,” read this poem, he recognized Parker's great potential yet realized the work's deliberately unrefined rawness might offend certain readers. So he convinced Parker to use a pseudonym and the poem was published with the name “Henrietta Rousseau.” Nina Miller claims Crowninshield should not have been worried. “The poem was so successful it demanded a sequel, this time a caustic attack on the men, for which Parker took full credit. Crowninshield subsequently commissioned a series of ‘Hate Songs,’ now freely capitalizing on the quintessentially 'sophisticated' lashings of a ‘sharp’ female tongue” (Miller 763).\(^{15}\) Eventually, Parker would pen almost twenty different “Hate Song” varieties in the same vein as her original piece, creating a series of humorous and witty protests against a wide array of cultural topics.

At this juncture, after Parker had proven herself to the magazine's power brokers, showing her organic ability to connect with readers in ways she could not accomplish as skillfully face-to-face yet, Crowninshield decided to transfer her to *Vanity Fair*. He offered

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14 The poem in its entirety is available online in the *Vanity Fair* HIVE. It lists the original publishing date of Parker's poem as August 1916.

15 Miller's 1992 article “Making Love Modern: Dorothy Parker and Her Public” takes a close look at a series of Parker's poems that focuses on romance. It specifically explores Parker's persona as a love poet, turning the intimate experience of romantic attachment into an open, accessible identity.
Parker a full-time staff writer position, where she could move beyond her former assistant duties of inventing captions, fact-checking, and proofreading to focus entirely on composing her signature, tongue-in-cheek articles. In late 1917, Crowninshield determined that Parker would be the perfect fit to write theater reviews for the magazine when P.G. Wodehouse, the magazine's drama critic, took a leave of absence. Kevin C. Fitzpatrick remarks that the significance of Parker as Vanity Fair's new theater critic should not be overlooked. He argues that in the context of this era, when women's rights were virtually nonexistent, the selection of a woman for this role has special significance. “Mrs. Parker stood out as the only female critic covering Broadway. She broke ground in a male-dominated profession when women in America could not vote, buy real estate on their own, or get a passport using their maiden name” (Fitzpatrick xv).16

While Fitzpatrick identifies the extraordinary gender barriers that Parker shattered, Stuart Y. Silverstein points out that the blossoming talent earned this big break solely due to her evident mastery as an author. He also contends that Parker attracted readers and built an avid audience based on her refusal to state her opinions in polite terms. Instead, Parker spoke her mind with a whimsical tone that dispensed with courtesy in favor of acute, often brutal honesty. “She started her column in the April 1918 issue and, as with the hate verses, she found she often preferred inflicting abuse to tendering praise. She was amusing, she was witty, she was wicked, and she was noticed. People started talking about the devilish Mrs. Parker” (Silverstein 18).

Unfortunately, her willingness to be sharply critical and even derogatory led to Parker's termination. Two years later, a certain theater review insulted an advertiser's spouse, who happened to be a performer in one of the productions Parker eviscerated, leading to her formal

16 Fitzpatrick edited a 2014 book titled Dorothy Parker: Complete Broadway 1918-1923. This quote is from his “Introduction,” which offers thoughtful insights on Parker's career in the magazine industry as a theater critic.
dismissal from the magazine. Rhonda S. Pettit argues that even though Parker's role as a theater reviewer evaporated after her brutal honesty precipitated political repercussions, she often determined a production's Broadway success. Plays that she lambasted regularly suffered grim fates by closing sooner than planned. Pettit observes: “Evidently her influence as a critic was substantial and threatening to the male-dominated world of theater production and magazine advertising” (Pettit 42). The reverberations of Parker's deliciously savage critiques illustrated her powerful effect on both readers and theatergoers alike.

Although Parker's stint at Vanity Fair ended abruptly, her experience as a staff writer transformed the future celebrity from an isolated, quiet young woman with few connections to an eminent cosmopolitan voice with a network of famous New York figures for support. By this time, she also enjoyed membership in an elite club of New York City authors, critics, actors, and artists known as the Algonquin Round Table, fondly named after the hotel where they met for lunch each day from 1919 until around 1929. Parker and former Vanity Fair coworkers Robert Benchley, who became her best friend and confidant for many years, and Robert Sherwood accidentally discovered the hotel during their lunchtime walks through New York City. The actual gatherings at this site began after several jocular peers of The New York Times columnist and critic Alexander Woollcott's organized an intervention of sorts to confront him on his lively boasts from his correspondence days during World War I. Afterward, the group decided that this playful event had been so successful that they should turn it into a daily function, where Parker

17 Pettit's 2000 book titled A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction makes provocative arguments about how literary critics have mischaracterized Parker's work. She points out that Parker wrote to earn a living and to judge her through the disconnected bubble of standards, which were largely patriarchal in nature, without appreciating the context of her work underestimates its relevance. In addition, Pettit states that the popularity of Parker's body of work suggests a literary importance often ignored by critics with rigid measures in their evaluation of greatness in American literature.
obtained star status. Julia Boissoneau Hans describes these regular social events and explains that Parker had been viewed as the “female lead.” In painting a picture of the midday outings, Hans states: “The young, oft inebriated writers liked to gather at lunchtime in New York's Algonquin Hotel to duel in repartees, secretly hoping that their _bon mots_ might appear in Woollcott's breathy column the next morning. Reportedly, no one could top the tiny but deadly Mrs. Parker” (Hans 99). Indeed, Parker built a reputation on interspersing sharp-witted rejoinders into these vivacious conversations, holding her own while surrounded mostly by powerful men who were just as ambitious as herself. As an example of Parker's obvious capacity to spar with these wordsmiths, her snappy retorts quite often surpassing their own, Jessica Burstein details one of Parker's most celebrated quips. Burstein asks her reader to visualize Parker dining at the Algonquin Round Table with a snapshot of the writers and actors often in attendance at these assemblies, including Benchley, Woollcott, Edna Ferber, and Harpo Marx. With this scene in mind, she then presents an engaging game that highlights the group's penchant for wordplay and Parker's comical mastery of the popular exercise:

Someone says, “Use the word _horticulture_ in a sentence.” Parker answers, “You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think.” This combines what Parker is known for: a semigraphic pun on sexuality, and an invocation of verdure - “horticulture” - the genteel world of trimming hedges and choosing flowers (Burstein 239)

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18 Hans's 2008 article “Whose Line is it Anyway? Reclamation of Language in Dorothy Parker's Polyphonic Monologues” focuses on how this literary celebrity disproved cultural stereotypes about women. According to Hans, Parker was a pioneer for women writers, refusing to submit to the cultural limitations of gender. She pushed back against patriarchal standards, using language in ways that shattered expectations about how women should interact with the written word, challenging the constraints that she faced due to her womanhood alone.

19 Burstein offers a thought-provoking argument for Parker's scholarly importance in her 2002 article “A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé.” She echoes Pettit's claims by stating that Parker is frequently overlooked and misunderstood because her well-known one-liners overshadow the popular author's many other literary contributions. Principally, Burstein points out that Parker offers a complex mix of satire, feminism, and sentimentalism that enhances modern literature in ways that aren't fully appreciated by critics.
Parker's natural capability in manipulating language to devise double meanings shines brightly in this anecdote. It demonstrates that Parker discovered the perfect place in which to belong, where she achieved an intrinsic understanding with other like-minded individuals, at least for a time. During her transition from magazine writer to literary superstar, the Algonquin Round Table connected Parker to the wider world in a manner she had never experienced before, significantly bridging the chasm that she endured for so long.

To offset the loss of income from Vanity Fair, she found other writing assignments as a freelancer through magazines such as Life and Ainslee's, building on her publishing contacts while also giving her more freedom to speak her mind. What's more, Parker obtained a promising audience for her short stories and poems due to many warm relationships with her Round Table contemporaries. Harold Ross, founder of The New Yorker and an active “Algonk” from this coalition of artists, became one of Parker's most high-profile advocates. Launched in 1925 from Ross's Manhattan home, The New Yorker published works from some of the best writers in the nation. Parker's stories appeared alongside the works of many distinguished writers, including Ring Lardner and John O'Hara, two authors who also developed important literary contacts via the same artistic group. Additionally, other Round Table members furnished Parker with opportunities to showcase her writing in print, including Vanity Fair editor Crowninshield, H.L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, and E.B. White. Rhonda S. Pettit argues that these publishing offers may have flourished due to Parker's association with peers in this exclusive group, but her writing already enchanted and drew readers, even without the benefit of her friends' eager promotion. Pettit claims:

...the popularity of the work itself in terms of sales suggests that Parker's poetry
and fiction - with its poetic conventions and narrative innovations, its decadent preoccupation with death, its modern cynicism toward relationships, and its sentimental longing for love - appealed to an audience characterized by a mixture of tastes. (Pettit 54)

Therefore, Parker's presence in various magazines and journals linked to Round Table participants not only helped her financially, it enhanced the reputations of those publications that printed her work as well. These mutually beneficial relationships enabled Parker's creative voice to be heard in numerous printed short stories and poems beginning in the 1920s and lasting, though less regularly, through the mid-1950s. Years later, while spiraling further into a deep depression, feeling more isolated and alone as one of the few living members of this former literary circle, Parker would attack the artistic union of friends, once again separating herself as an outsider. Despite these criticisms after the fact, the Algonquin Round Table offered Parker her first taste of genuine acceptance as well as an enthusiastic forum for the writing that would come to define this iconic author.

Regardless of the support, mutual respect, and affection shown to Parker through the Round Table, she hid details of her ethnic history from these friends, avoiding any transparency about a complex heritage that she plausibly viewed as an invisible line that separated her from everyone else. Because of Parker's secrecy, several members of this clique shared mistaken ideas about her family background. They widely believed that Rothschild had been a Talmudic scholar, unaware of his actual profession in garment manufacturing and his link to sweatshops on the Lower East Side, inaccurate assumptions that Parker never corrected. Instead of offering accurate details about her family, which may have set Parker farther apart from her peers, she adopted a tough outer shell during these first years of friendship. Surrounded by her influential male connections in the Algonquin group, Parker appropriated the role of an entertaining jokster
and put-down artist. Meade emphasizes that Parker's very ability to morph herself into a quick-minded jester blossomed directly from skills her extended family had passed onto her. Indeed, this talent remained another facet of Parker's personality that she refused to discuss:

Dorothy's reputation as a funny woman was born at the Algonquin...In the opening years of the twenties, when New York humor was quickening its pace, nobody had faster reactions than she did. She had learned all there was to know about speedy repartee in her father's house, where it had been a staple of every gathering of the Rothschild aunts and uncles, although nothing would have induced her to advertise that bit of personal history. (Meade 81)

This comedic approach to social interactions, which she perfected from her upbringing, served multiple purposes, shielding Parker from an authentic representation of actual ethnicity and emotional fragility.

Although she disguised this vulnerability as well as the perpetual feelings of isolation with biting remarks and flippant puns to her Algonquin Round Table friends, that same devilish approach did not extend to her romantic relationships. By the time the Algonquin circle grew to become Parker's main source of contacts, she had already been married to Edwin “Eddie” Pond Parker II for two stormy years. Privately, this union consisted of almost constant emotional and obsessive drama, where Parker felt helpless and alone most of the time. A former New York City stockbroker, Parker's husband returned to New York after serving in World War I with untreated post traumatic stress disorder fueled by an addiction to alcohol. Substance abuse, a habit Parker incorporated into her life through Edwin Parker's dependency and compulsive need to self-medicate, further aggravated the misery of their marriage. To make matters worse, his Christian family in Connecticut, including a grandfather who had been an admired reverend, appeared to exclude the young author at every opportunity. Before marrying Eddie Parker, she worried about his relatives discovering her true ethnicity. “If these patricians ever learned of her Jewishness,
she could just imagine their dismay, how quickly they would snatch him back to their black-robbed bosoms” (Meade 40). Although Dorothy Parker had reshaped herself, abandoning her Rothschild roots for a generic front that veered away from her Jewish heritage, all of the insecurities related to her complicated religious identity immediately rushed back and reversed this confidence. Parker's immense worries at losing her husband because of his family's prejudice also thrust her into otherness territory once more. This paranoia only exacerbated the personal problems in Parker's troubled marriage.

The contrast between Parker's robust and forceful presence in print as well as with her Algonquin peers and the intense longing for affection that blurred her judgment, further deepening her emotional isolation, demonstrates the conflicted set of doubles that she continually battled. Indeed, Parker's world revolved around these contradictions that heightened her alienation, defining a life more performative than authentic in many unfortunate senses. As she perfected a resilient armor with her one-liners and a devil-may-care attitude, Parker camouflaged the shame and religious identity issues that hovered beneath the surface. This same doubleness existed in her raw critiques of patriarchal attitudes toward womanhood, where she could be sarcastically bold in the written word, confronting the media's callous stereotypes of women, while hiding her romantic dependence on men and their authority over intimate relationships. To Pettit, these inconsistencies represent the complexity that encompasses Parker's entire style as a writer:

This perceived paradox of Parker's life certainly echoes the conflicts present in her work: poems that mourn for lost love and callously reject it, stories with sympathetic and cruelly satiric character portrayals, essays that often use language of qualification to express strongly negative opinions about books or plays. (Meade 36)
Eternal opposition does merge together in Parker's work and creates layers of meaning beneath deceptively straightforward language. Indeed, Parker proves to be an accomplished master of such variations within a single narrative. But as an individual, she can be viewed as a study of severe ups and downs, an erratic composition whose unpredictability becomes reliable in time. This constant vacillation adds a sad dimension to her complicated portrait. In a desperate attempt to hold onto her husband, for instance, Parker actively diminished her accomplishments while writing for *Vanity Fair*. Meade affirms that Parker “took care to minimize her professional ambitions around him for fear of disturbing his masculine sensibilities” (Meade 40). The effort Parker sustained to deprecate her talents, particularly for Eddie Parker's benefit, thoroughly contradicted the strident outrage she expressed against sexism in written works that audiences found so enthralling. However, this durable covering could never fully suppress the self-conscious otherness that appeared in times of distress. Her husband's intolerant family only magnified the discord. Although these in-laws behaved politely toward her face-to-face, she still felt their exclusion as an indirect assault on her Jewish heritage. Meade describes the rejection that Parker constantly experienced in their presence: “Despite their cordiality, Dorothy was quick to notice that they were treating her like a New York Jew on the make, an outsider with stylish suits and advanced ideas about careers for women” (Meade 41). This judgment from the Parker clan combined anti-Semitism and sexism into one massive, insurmountable accusation, an underlying message that she did not meet the family's standards or belong, which only exacerbated her own severe lack of confidence and self-worth. Simultaneously, the Parker family's repudiation of her deepened the empathy and understanding of outsiders, which she wove into her body of work with sensitivity, emotion, and a touch of well-placed satire.
While Parker's sense of otherness spilled into her romantic life, she became a more public figure, where her intimate agonies and increased reliance on alcohol launched sensationalistic intrigue that, at times, overshadowed the serious work of her writing. Ultimately divorcing Parker in 1928 after intermittent separations, attempts to reunite, and bitter fighting that periodically became violent, she added to her celebrity with excessive drinking at speakeasies and various parties with her Algonquin friends until the early morning hours. Even before finally ending the obsessive misery of her marriage, she became fixated on finding love or some kind of affection to resolve the chaos of her relationship with Eddie Parker. Scott Donaldson describes the author's heartsick, despairing behavior as her troubled marriage came to an inevitable end:

The marriage foundered, leading Parker to serial affairs, including a disastrous one with the newspaperman Charles MacArthur that ended in 1922 with an abortion and the first of her several suicide attempts. “Mrs. Parker,” as she liked to be called, began drinking heavily during that time, but in its initial stages the alcohol did not affect her appearance or her reputation as the life of the party. (Donaldson 44)20

Parker's sexual neediness as she mourned the conclusion of her marriage took the literary celebrity on a dark journey, even as she made light jokes and downplayed her suicidal actions, sometimes while recovering in the hospital. Still, despite this emotional unraveling, Parker remained adamant about how she wished to be addressed, post-divorce. As Donaldson notes, Parker preferred to hold onto her married name. It remained the one treasured souvenir that she kept from her failed marriage, refusing to return to her Rothschild identity. Meade builds on

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20 Donaldson's 2016 article “Scott and Dottie” speculates about the actual relationship between Dorothy Parker and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Donaldson methodically looks at the known interactions between Parker and Fitzgerald, letters and telegrams they had written, as well as historical events through newspapers and biographies, among other sources. Without any definitive proof of a romance, he theorizes that an affair did occur based on the information he has gathered. In Donaldson's view, he suspects Parker and Fitzgerald engaged in a brief liaison after Zelda Fitzgerald's third mental breakdown. Incidentally, 1934 is also the year that Parker married her second husband Alan Campbell.
Donaldson's assertion with an illuminating anecdote. She explains Parker's reasons for staying with her marital surname in spite of a difficult union that only deteriorated over time:

Many years later, in a hard mood, she told friends that she had wanted to marry Eddie because he had a nice, clean name. The people to whom she made this admission were Jewish; while they loved her enough not to take offense, they could not help lifting their eyebrows: Did she think their names were unclean? It was not a comparable situation at all, she protested, because their Jewish names sounded acceptable in some inexplicable way that Rothschild did not.

(Meade 40)

Because she had conflicts with her heritage, it is logical that Parker felt drawn to a name lacking any obvious hints of ethnicity. Therefore, she could continue to blend into society, appearing in publications without the risks of anti-Semitic responses ejecting her from the mainstream.

However, even with the paradoxes that characterized Parker's adult life, her personal instinct to avoid mention of her complex roots and family background did not extend to broader cultural sympathies. Instead, Parker never wavered on the topic of mistreatment. She conveyed her disapproval openly and consistently without reserve or any concern for the potential negative impact on her writing career. A year before divorcing Eddie Parker, she became outraged by a high-profile execution scheduled of Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in Boston, both accused of murder with scant evidence. Parker joined other writers, including Katherine Anne Porter and Edna St. Vincent Millay, to protest the case, triggering a newfound political activism to help those marginalized and abused by society. Barry Day explains that unfairness enraged her and Parker demanded to be heard. “All she knew was that injustice in any form made her ‘wild,’ and as the country lurched into depression, she saw plenty of it” (Day 163). The fury spurred by this planned execution inspired Parker to organize a march, eventually getting arrested for her notable objections. Though these impassioned efforts failed to save the
defendants, Parker's fierce compassion for the downtrodden had been unleashed by this event. Social advocacy with an intense focus on politics transfigured her life from that moment forward, anchoring every experience with the determination to improve the world around her somehow.

In the midst of this awakening, where Parker finally found a mission that somehow diminished her chronic disconnectedness, thus securing a place to belong, Parker married actor-screenwriter Alan Campbell in 1934. Like her first marriage, this union to Campbell followed a similar pattern of turbulence and discord. While Parker enjoyed great happiness during the early years, the couple divorced in 1947 and then remarried in 1950. Campbell shared his wife's mixed Judaic-Scottish background, though without the same torturous emotions, and soon after their honeymoon convinced Parker to become a screenwriting team in Hollywood, where her activism soared. During her chaotic adventures with Campbell, a relationship filled with settling down, uprooting, and then resituating in homes that spread from New York to Hollywood, and certain other regions in between, Parker's one steady anchor remained a ferocious dedication to political action. On a number of levels, she showed greater devotion to social causes than to the needs of those closest to her, particularly Campbell. Eleven years her junior, Campbell had been content to manage all of the affairs of his celebrity wife, even enduring her alcoholic rages and periodic public abuse. Instead, his role as her dutiful shadow created more and more tension between the couple while Parker continued to pledge substantial time to her political involvement, ultimately jeopardizing their financial future. These reverberations were of no concern to her. Perhaps Parker felt ready to take such risks because she associated herself with society's most vulnerable and fighting for their rights offered psychological comfort. It enabled Parker to transcend her
eternal displacement, to become proactive against the societal prejudice that compelled her to suppress part of her cultural identity for so long. She could then overcome the invisible line that separated her through the advocacy of those who also struggled within the limited parameters of a parochial society.

To that end, Parker set her fiction and poetry to the side for a time to focus on social justice, transcending her perennial otherness to institute positive change. From pushing for screenwriters' rights to speaking out against Nazism, Parker refused to stay silent. The rise of Hitler especially frightened Parker and Meade claims the author's own ethnicity provoked this strong response:

What drew her attention most powerfully was news of the Third Reich’s persecution of Jews. Her ambivalence over her own Jewishness was so great that she would think of herself as a “mongrel” because of her mixed origins to the end of her life. At the same time, she found anti-Semitism terrifying and had begun to take a passionate, emotional interest in what was happening politically in Germany. (Meade 253)

Because of Parker's intimate yet virtually unexplored link to Judaism, she channeled her fear into intense activism with a direct connection to her own heritage. In this regard, she vocalized her concern to those around her, warning everyone of Hitler's dangers. What's more, Donald O. Dewey points out that Parker vehemently condemned fascism when politicians in Hollywood and Washington, D.C. did not regard Hitler and Mussolini as dangerous threats. Parker disagreed with their dismissals of this imminent danger, closely identifying even further with Hitler's targets. Over time, she transformed her once stylish appearance into more of a proletarian look, complete with a babushka, a peasant's blouse, a shapeless skirt, and flats. This conversion, where Parker seemingly projected the impression of an anonymous Lower East Side sweatshop worker, signaled more allegiance to Jewish culture than she had ever exhibited before. In fact, during this
time, Parker broadcast her otherness, openly revealing the outsider she hid for most of her adult life beneath generic sophistication to gain acceptance.

In addition to this sweeping reconfiguration of her identity, where her religious roots were dramatically more apparent, Parker joined organizations and attended meetings designed to help the vulnerable. Essentially, her alignment with otherness shifted from a source of isolation to an empowering force. Dewey states that Parker considered these leadership roles to be profound triumphs of her life:

She was proud to be co-founder in 1936 of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, which unquestionably included a number of Communists. She regarded this and her similar role that same year in resuscitating the American Screen Writers Guild to be among her greatest accomplishments. (Dewey 98)

Interestingly, Parker viewed the beneficial results of her activism as prominent achievements, which may have equaled or even eclipsed the importance of her literary success. That suggests Parker obtained significant emotional satisfaction from her advocacy efforts, where she demanded valid attention and concern for the underdog, otherwise considered invisible to society. Notwithstanding these merits, Parker's decision to insert herself into controversial political causes still generated harsh consequences. Due to her outspoken participation in anti-fascist movements, she eventually joined other creative contemporaries as a blacklisted writer in Hollywood during the McCarthy era, facing serious accusations of Communist sympathies. In the end, Parker never testified before Congress, though she was included on a list devised by the

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21 Dewey's 2007 article “Professor Dorothy Parker” focuses on a single year in Parker's life when she agreed to teach literature at California State University out of severe financial need. In 1962, just five years before her death in her furnished, New York City hotel room, she and Campbell were struggling to make a living in Hollywood. Because Parker had been blacklisted, their finances were in terrible shape. So Parker grudgingly agreed to teach college courses, which Dewey describes in wonderful, comprehensive detail. He interviews her students as well as their impressions of her, which were much more positive than her own critical as well as negative accounts of this experience.
House Committee on Un-American Affairs (HUAC) in 1951 that singled out Communists. Parker denied this accusation, but still stayed passionately involved in her social causes. Even today, it is still not clear whether Parker had progressed further than just expressing support for communist ideas and actually joined this party. But her political sympathy with this movement remains undisputed because it likely helped Parker reconcile with her perennial otherness. Communism's core philosophy advanced equality and an inclusive sense of community that would have plausibly allowed Parker to feel more at home with her ethnic identity, not conceal it for societal approval. This engagement provided agency, allowing Parker to be in control, not susceptible to a brutal culture intolerant of ethnic differences. Indeed, Parker's innate understanding of an outsider's existence and her authentic compassion for discarded, rejected individuals often on the fringes of society distinguish Parker's work. Moreover, a satirical flavor weaves through her stories' undercurrents, providing an understated feel, sometimes even tongue-in-cheek, that provides the narrative distance to be critical without ever veering into the overly emotional.

From racial injustice and social ostracization to the patriarchal limitations of American womanhood and unreciprocated love, Parker looks at the world through the eyes of those who suffer, who are cast aside, and who lack the power or the ability to voice and address their own victimization. Alongside this candid sympathy, Parker's sardonic edge makes her sensitivity to marginalized perspectives a clearer reflection of the utter harshness of life. Specifically, Parker's most celebrated work emphasizes an outsider's view within an atmosphere that illustrates privilege of some sort, showing how unspoken otherness operates in the realm of affluent, upper middle-class society. As a prime illustration of this theme, Parker's short story titled “Big
“Blonde” (1929) embodies the complex paradox of extreme alienation in a world of economic prosperity through the troubled eyes of heroine Hazel Morse. Her portrayals of domestic, privileged settings through the viewpoints of disengaged, emotionally damaged protagonists offer a distinct outlook on alienation and its existence, even in the most elite surroundings. The satirical, even quite disparaging story titled “From the Diary of a New York Lady: During Days of Horror, Despair, and World Change” (1933), for instance, exemplifies this category of Parker protagonists. Structured as an ongoing journal with daily entries, this piece portrays an insulated socialite who meticulously documents grievances about her nail polish color and elaborate descriptions of her evening gowns rather than any substantial acknowledgment of the hostility within her estranged marriage. Furthermore, though Parker scrutinizes intricate dynamics within the private domain of home and family, where tensions can persist in secret, she refuses to maintain a politically correct manner or to stay within prescribed boundaries. Regina Barreca explains that Parker dared to probe topics most writers evaded at the time due to the controversial subject matter. According to Barreca, Parker defied this literary trend to explore real-life problems, artfully delving into these unarticulated issues via the numerous heroines of her short stories. “She wrote about abortion when you couldn’t write the word and wrote about chemical and emotional addiction when the concepts were just a gleam in the analysts’ collective eye” (Barreca vii). Indeed, Parker does not refrain from the examination of these concerns and expertly interlaces a viewpoint of philosophical experience into each piece. Applying humor, empathy, and a depth that reflects a lived understanding, Parker illustrates what it means to feel complete emotional invisibility despite all appearances of economic and social success.

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Further complicating matters, Parker frequently constructs her plots in the volatile sphere of romantic relationships and entwines complex layers of emotional estrangement into the conflicts. While Parker occasionally represents these intimate affairs through a flawed man's eyes, the majority of Parker's works adopt a woman's neurotic, self-serving, or overly innocent outlook, often for satiric purposes, which contorts the foundational loneliness that she describes even more. Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams argues that Parker's most forceful work derives from her complicated examination of American womanhood:

Parker's portraits of the victimization and self-deprecation of women in the 1920s and 30s along with the privilege and self-delusion of the New York elite are among the most poignant and lasting. Her satiric portraits are all the more telling in that they reveal and revile through indirection, with a smile. (Fuchs-Abrams 96)

Through Parker's satirical yet pointedly judgmental exploration of women and their troubled romances as well as their lack of agency in New York society, she critiques the patriarchal values that control these unfulfilling relationships. Yet Parker also regards her female protagonists with a realistic eye, never glossing over their own deficiencies. Joseph L. Coulombe observes that Parker declines to idealize her women characters, depicting them with all of their strengths and weaknesses visible in every circumstance:

Dorothy Parker's female characters exist in a modern entanglement of emerging options and traditional expectations, and Parker uses humor to comment upon the opportunities as well as the challenges for women positioned at the intersection of old and new gender codes. While some of her characters are strong and adaptable, others are ill-equipped to navigate changing cultural expectations. Her weaker characters bemoan their absent boy friends, fall prey to predatory men, or become alcoholic and suicidal as they face a life with little apparent purpose. (Coulombe 45)²³

In short, Parker acknowledges the societal limitations that her heroines must endure, but does not

²³ Coulombe’s 2013 article titled “Performing Humor in Dorothy Parker’s Fiction” redefines the author’s use of wit in her short stories and poems. He argues that Parker’s integration of humor should not be taken lightly. Instead, it needs to be recognized as a strategy for demonstrating the complexities of womanhood in American culture.
render them helpless to resolve situational issues either. Their imperfections are on full display, even with Parker's sympathetic touches, when pertinent. But it must also be noted that Parker's disparaging evaluations of certain heroines in her works, whom she observes as worthy of narrative censure, are frequently a reflection of her own self-criticism. Biographer Barry Day remarks that Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker's best friend and early colleague at *Vanity Fair*, recognized the precise source of her scathing look at contemporary womanhood. Likely the one person in Parker's life who understood her with the greatest depth, Benchley identified the exact reason for some of her uncharitable portraits. Day states that her close confidant recognized Parker “was critical of so many affectations because she feared - as Mr. Benchley warned - that she suffered from many of them herself” (Day 50-51). Therefore, Parker's appraisals, amusing, comic, heartfelt, and merciless, can also be viewed as assessments of her own feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem in relationships as well as in the general patterns of life itself. She did not see her personal existence as morally superior to the heroines who populated her stories. Instead, Parker's narratorial criticisms are also indictments of her own weaknesses, obsessions, neurotic responses to conflicts, and every other imperfection she encountered as Dorothy Parker, the undeniably flawed human being. This quality, an admission of sorts, makes the raw honesty of her work, where pain and agonizing exclusion are always confronted without whitewash, a cathartic experience of unapologetic authenticity.

While Parker's most famous short stories are satirical slice-of-life tales about romantic disconnection, primarily relying on dialogue that escalates in emotion, she also offers an impressive series of more serious works that explore a wandering, unsettling alienation. Although touches of irony add a complex texture to these narratives, the central framework
contains a solemn edge in the unfulfilled search for belonging. The protagonists, usually (but not always) women embark on journeys to break free from either apparent or invisible barriers that separate them, preventing the much-desired acceptance that stays forever out of reach. More often than not, the perceivable cultural differences such as those Parker experienced are presented in the form of social class, though race also weaves through her stories to define otherness. Alongside an estrangement that comes with the insurmountable outsider stigma, Parker complicates her landscapes with the misery of emotions crushed under the necessary weight of societal suppression. Indeed, the alienation that she scrutinizes through her characters frequently derives from an unspoken pressure not to feel, to acquiesce to a black hole of detachment in order to survive in an unkind society that particularly disdains the most sensitive. Though Parker refrains from fusing Judaism, or even religion of any kind, into her examinations of otherness, the desolation that she portrays with such painful depth closely aligns with her own cultural struggles. Therefore, these stories suggest they are a direct reaction to Parker's unresolved feelings as a chronic outsider who embodies a mixed heritage. Furthermore, Parker discloses that the strain to keep that agony hidden, where it must exist under such strict control so as not to cause any societal disturbance, only worsens the alienation, aggravated by a tragic inability to find ultimate belonging.

In fact, Parker's most celebrated and acclaimed short story “Big Blonde” complicates her landscapes with an alienation that derives from an unspoken pressure not to feel. It represents her own estrangement more thoroughly than any of Parker's other works. Understated in its sentiment yet an agonizing illustration of great pain, the story demonstrates how isolation and emotional suppression converge for one woman on the precipice of self-destruction. Winner of
the 1929 O. Henry Award for the best short story of the year and first published in *The Bookman*, "Big Blonde" describes the downward spiral of Hazel Morse, a party girl who struggles with profound sadness following the traumatic dissolution of her marriage. Due to the depth and artistry of Parker's story, this twenty-three page narrative, a significantly longer work than most of her pieces, Viking Press offered her an advance for a novel. Though Parker never fulfilled that contract, attempting suicide instead out of the sheer stress of producing a long-form manuscript, "Big Blonde" shows the sophisticated flair of her story-telling ability and the depth of empathic recognition of extreme loneliness. Parker begins by painting a distinct image of Hazel as someone who elevates feminine beauty above all else, not realizing its repercussions to her happiness until she confronts the realities of divorce. Prior to this recognition, Hazel feels content to cast herself in the limited gaze of men, subject to physical appearance alone:

Hazel Morse was a large, fair woman of the type that incites some men when they use the word ‘blonde’ to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly. She prided herself on her small feet and suffered for her vanity, boxing them in snub-toed, high-heeled slippers of the shortest bearable size. The curious things about her were her hands, strange terminations to the flabby white arms splattered with pale tan spots – long, quivering hands with deep and convex nails. She should not have disfigured them with little jewels. (Parker 105)24

The narrative's laser focus on outward impressions traps Hazel in a bubble that she cannot escape, though this truth remains elusive until her husband's eventual rejection. As a model for an area dress shop in New York City, attractiveness, the top priority of her job, provides obvious advantages to Hazel. Before selecting a husband from the list of suitors she encounters through this line of work, Hazel recognizes that earning the appeal of men, viewing her worth through

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24 *Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics* has printed all of Dorothy Parker's short stories and sketches in one volume. It was first published by *Penguin Books* in 1995 and contains each work's publishing date as well as the original publication that printed the piece.
their perspective alone, matters more than anything else. Unfortunately, Hazel does not understand until her marriage falls apart that she has permitted the patriarchal view of womanhood to confiscate her purpose beyond an eternal ego boost for men. Ellen Lansky explains how Hazel's elevation of male approval serves as a trap that eventually alienates her from any support. Lansky observes that Hazel “...finds herself under the eye of men who expect her to be charming and attentive, conforming to their notions of appropriate behavior for a woman” (Lansky 221). In this way, Hazel unwittingly gives men control over her identity, allowing their responsiveness to shape her self-worth in the process. Blind to the authority that she grants to men, Hazel also delights in the easiness of her role, where flattery and giggly flirtations with the different men who enter the shop encompass her primary responsibilities. Indeed, she amounts to nothing more than a tool to the store's male consumers.

Yet Parker also interlaces an additional dimension to Hazel, demonstrating that this heroine possesses the capacity to overcome the alienation that eventually dominates her existence. Scott Ortolano offers a complex perspective on Hazel's role, acknowledging the inherent sexism that she embraces while also viewing this protagonist as the epitome of the “New Woman.” During the late nineteenth century, American women began to demand agency and equality, emerging as a new and more assertive manifestation of womanhood. Ortolano feels Hazel owns greater control over her choices than even she might recognize. He states: ”Dorothy Parker’s Hazel is an embodiment of the new woman, and she finds her relationship with modernity to be freeing and inherently superior to the roles made available in more traditional cultural spaces. However, Hazel only gains her independence by adhering to patriarchal norms

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25 Lansky's 1998 article “Female Trouble: Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter, and Alcoholism” looks closely at both of these writers and how their works relate to the alcohol addictions that dominated their lives.
and successfully becoming a pleasing object” (Ortolano 234).26 Parker builds this integral contradiction into Hazel, where the protagonist takes full advantage of modern opportunities while still shaping herself into a sexual object that indirectly welcomes her own oppression, lacking awareness of the agency at her disposal. More than anything else, however, Hazel wants to attract men. Parker explains this desire in simple terms, demonstrating her heroine's ignorance about the implications of such yielding consent: “Men liked you because you were fun, and when they liked you they took you out, and there you were” (Parker 105). In other words, Hazel's only responsibility involves proving an eager interest in the man of a particular moment. By her willingness to perform with an exuberant, complimentary attitude that never falters, she wins male approval. It only occurs to Hazel when her marriage crumbles that she had reduced herself to nothing more than a pretty, smiling, encouraging face. Ross Labrie places Hazel's predicament in the context of how Parker viewed her women characters. He points out the complexity in Parker's depiction of women: “Although a feminist all her life, Dorothy Parker portrayed women as not only victims of an insensitive and predatory male sex, but, inasmuch as women welcome the roles which society has ordained for them, as gullible destroyers of themselves” (Labrie 52).27 Labrie nicely explains that Hazel's suffering evolves not just from the patriarchal society in which she lives, but due to her own poor judgment and lack of awareness until after her disastrous marriage falls apart.

26 Ortolano's 2016 article titled “Liberation, Degeneration, and Transcendence(?): The Promise and Paradox of the ‘New Woman’ in Edna Ferber's Dawn O'Hara, The Girl Who Laughed and Dorothy Parker's ‘Big Blonde’” examines how the “New Woman” is treated in selected works by Parker and Ferber. His insights on “Big Blonde” are quite interesting, particularly in the historical context of flappers.

27 Labrie's 1976 article “Dorothy Parker Revisited” is a thoughtful piece that looks at this author's work with an appreciation of her literary skill. He argues that Parker's works have been unfairly neglected and explains why she is an artist who deserves admiration.
Prior to that unbearable epiphany, Hazel decides to make the necessary transition from party girl to housewife for the sake of security as well as to achieve stability, where she can establish a real home for herself. Also, because her usual pattern of “being a good sport among her male acquaintances” (Parker 106) had lost its luster, becoming more of a conscious effort to earn income, Hazel realizes her window of opportunity to attract a mate will not last much longer as she ages. Upon meeting Herbie, she promptly evaluates him as good husband material. In addition to his thin, quick handsomeness and financial ability to take care of her, Hazel views him as fun and entertaining to be around. Six weeks after the two meet, they marry and, for once, Hazel feels able to drop the act, to waive the constant upbeat performances. Instead, she pursues a true connection with her new spouse. Thus, Hazel discovers her emotional side, delighted by actually feeling something real:

Wedded and relaxed, she poured her tears freely. To her who had laughed so much, crying was delicious. All sorrows became her sorrows. She was Tenderness. She would cry long and softly over newspaper accounts of kidnapped babies, deserted wives, unemployed men, strayed cats, heroic dogs. Even when the paper was no longer before her, her mind revolved upon these things and the drops slipped rhythmically over her plump cheeks. (Parker 107)

The dependability of marriage reassures Hazel that she has permission to abandon the superficial cheeriness required in her former modeling job. Ortolano equates Hazel's feelings as an indication of her newfound consciousness, where authentic emotions are no longer suppressed: “Hazel’s increasingly frequent habit of crying marks her personal awakening and growing unhappiness with both the world and her place within it. Tears - and the sensations that accompany them - are diametrically opposed to the carefree happiness she had previously exhibited” (Parker 242). Now that Hazel can remove that mask, she develops a capacity to see the universe surrounding her in genuine terms, not through the facade of a salaried cheerleader.
In addition to this arousal, Hazel adores domestic life, where she devotes all of her time to creating the ideal home for Herbie while also feeling safe. Parker's narrative concisely explains Hazel's bliss: “This was marriage. This was peace” (Parker 107). Although Hazel achieves contentment, Herbie does not share this euphoria and grows more impatient with his wife's moods over time. Resentment replaces concern as Herbie realizes Hazel is not the eternally chipper party girl he had assumed. So he starts coming home from work later and later each evening, returning as a drunken mess, and they argue more frequently. The long periods of Herbie's absence, where Hazel helplessly, quite longingly, waits for his return, inspires her fear and yearning torment: “She desperately wanted him to want to be with her; her own hours only masked the time till he would come home” (Parker 108). With Hazel now unleashing even more intensive emotions, her dependency and vulnerability become more pronounced.

As the marriage continues to fall apart, Hazel sees her dreams of domestic security disappearing, which only deepens the insurmountable division between the couple. Drinking becomes the only method left to stay connected, even though Hazel never resorted to alcohol before entering this tumultuous relationship. But no other solution exists to maintain and preserve the home space she treasures. Yet as the drinking and fighting escalate, Hazel feels immense resentment toward Herbie:

She fought him furiously. A terrific domesticity had come upon her, and she would bite and scratch to guard it. She wanted what she called "a nice home." She wanted a softer, tender husband, prompt at dinner, punctual at work. She wanted sweet, comforting evenings. The idea of intimacy with other men was terrible to her; the thought that Herbie might be seeking entertainment in other women set her frantic. (Parker 108)

With her sense of belonging under the threat of destruction, Hazel engages in the toxic rhythms of a marriage defined by substance abuse and constant disconnection. The narrative explains that
despite the terrible circumstances, which only intensify, Hazel maintains the hope that Herbie will soften into married life to ensure their happiness together: “Here were her home, her furniture, her husband, her station. She summoned no alternatives” (Parker 110). To Hazel, the loss of her personal corner of the world, a place to call her own, appears more important than the actual relationship with Herbie, whom she refers to only through his role alone, not his name, and never truly knew before their impulsive marriage. Indeed, just as Herbie does not bother to view Hazel as an individual, she displays the same indifference for his uniqueness. Herbie could be anyone. But regardless of any attachment to this relationship, Hazel's failure to keep her home, the real anchor of her life, would force her to surrender both identity and belonging, an authentic connection to the world. Parker demonstrates how even a person such as Hazel, an attractive woman with no shortage of potential suitors and resources, can be defenseless against desertion and easily become an outsider. While Parker avoids any mention of culture or a prejudice of any kind spurring Hazel's imminent ejection into nothingness, she shows in painful detail the path to alienation and how emotional expression may inspire abandonment. In effect, the secondary status of womanhood substitutes for otherness in this society, where without stable, patriarchal support and approval, women are vulnerable to expulsion, absent of any real worth.

On the verge of rejection, Hazel becomes increasingly alone and begins to drink by herself, wandering through the apartment in a daze that reflects more detachment than ever. The fortunate arrival across the hall of new neighbor Mrs. Martin saves Hazel, serving as a transition between Herbie's departure and the necessary return to her old life as an enthusiastic flapper. Though it takes more effort now to turn on her former effervescence, Hazel does her best to
suppress authentic feelings to be a chipper admirer of the men she meets through Mrs. Martin. Poker games and drinking carry Hazel through her stupor as Herbie leaves and a series of faceless men take his place to pay the bills. Ortolano astutely points out that inebriation becomes a substitute for the expression of emotion, a mechanism for handling the alienation that derives from this forced concealment: “Alcohol eventually displaces crying as her mode of coping with the world, but drinking plays much the same role” (Ortolano 243). In fact, one admirer named Ed responds with particular disapproval if Hazel exhibits any emotion beyond lightheartedness, encouraging her to remain drunk in his presence. While accepting Ed's generous gifts, Hazel quickly understands the limitations of his sponsorship, knowing “...she had to be careful of her moods with him. He insisted upon gaiety. He would not listen to admissions of aches or weariness” (Parker 115). Numbed by emotional repression in combination with endless alcohol, Hazel lacks genuine interest in Ed to explain her perspective, but “...she still wanted the privilege of occasional admitted sadness” (Parker 115). Encountering the reality that she must twist herself into someone else, embracing a former identity that does not encompass her recent evolution, Hazel gradually falls into a never-ending fatigue as her thoughts move toward suicide. Indeed, Parker's narration, straightforward on the surface with a quiet acceptance of Hazel's pain, leads to a point of irreversible despair: “The thought of death came and stayed with her and lent her a sort of drowsy cheer. It would be nice, nice and restful, to be dead” (Parker 116). Over a short period of time, Hazel swerves from marital glee, of building a genuine attachment with her spouse to form their home together, to thoughts of self-destruction. She cannot withstand the humiliation of relying on the financial support of men who demand that she revert back to mere decoration, not after experiencing actual authenticity and awareness.
Desperate and feeling emotionally alone, Hazel chooses a method of suicide after an offhand conversation about insomnia with her former neighbor. Mrs. Miller recommends the medicine veronal for sleeplessness, which Hazel uses to end her isolation for good. As she lies unconscious from the sleeping potion, her housekeeper Nettie senses something is wrong. Because Nettie and the building attendant quickly enlist the help of a doctor, Hazel survives this suicide attempt. Nobody else in Hazel's life shows the concern or willingness to act that Nettie demonstrates. When Hazel finally gains consciousness two days later, after Nettie has nursed her for two days, she receives an angry reproach from her housekeeper. Nettie scolds Hazel, questioning and lecturing her as more of a critical parent than an employee. An embarrassed Hazel replies, “I’m sorry I’ve given you so much trouble, I couldn’t help it. I just got sunk. Didn’t you ever feel like doing it? When everything looks just lousy to you?” (Parker 123). To Nettie, such desperation seems unthinkable and she announces her disapproval, reiterating the message Hazel has heard countless times, to cheer up and not dwell on any feelings. Nettie ends her response with: “Everyone's got their troubles” (Parker 123). Indeed, Nettie's dismissal of Hazel's distress echoes the reprimands from so many men in this heroine's life who prefer an exuberant demeanor to genuine sentiments. Such an attitude insinuates that a repressed society, one that avoids emotion at all costs, provides an agreeable alternative, removing the responsibility of mutual consideration for others, especially the most defenseless. Although Nettie saves Hazel, she conveys impatience with her employer's self-destructive decision, not compassion.

However, though Nettie's reaction emphasizes the collective disregard toward Hazel's emotions, she still tempers this indifference while also providing greater definition of isolation
and of otherness. Amelia Simpson believes that Nettie's presence as an African American woman in this story also accentuates facets of enslavement. She offers a thought-provoking interpretation of how Parker treats race in "Big Blonde," applying the inherent restraint used on minorities to Hazel's predicament. Simpson's analysis calls attention to Nettie in a manner that underscores Parker's powerful awareness of racial intolerance's deep-rooted connection to cultural estrangement, an agonizing alienation she personally experienced: “In that text, the author produces a narrative about the subjugation of white women in America, using the scaffolding of blacks in America” (Simpson 106). Therefore, Parker sees women, who may seem to be privileged because of their fair skin, as actually similar to imprisoned and mistreated African Americans. Indeed, according to Simpson's argument, even though the two women are of different races, they are both outsiders in Parker's oppressive design of this world, unable to seize control of their lives. Such a view supports Parker's own experience of estrangement, where she grappled with intense otherness despite the appearance of social standing. The exclusion she suffered remained imperceptible to everyone around her. Illustrating the complexity of Parker's framework, Simpson adds another insightful layer to her analysis of the African American culture's integral role in Parker's story:

In the absence of blackness, Morse would be less white, less innocent, less alone. She would be less effective in dramatizing her story of estrangement and alienation, and less able to contain and isolate the germ of another idea: That all American freedom is broadly and historically conditional. (Simpson 47)

In fact, by equating Hazel's crisis with the African-American experience, Parker provides a

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28 Simpson's eye-opening 1996 article titled “The Africanist Presence in Dorothy Parker's 'Big Blonde'” closely reads how race plays an integral role in this short story about alienation that specifically focuses on American womanhood. She discusses Parker's use of racial oppression and how the author applies this injustice to gender mistreatment within the nation's patriarchal society.
concrete example of marginalization and the grim results of cultural division.

Furthermore, Parker depicts a society that lacks any kind of empathy on multiple fronts, where individuals who suffer substantial oppression align their values with the powerful, not the ostracized. As a consequence, these minorities, unfairly treated and existing on the societal fringes, accept as well as condone a prejudice toward their own identities. In truth, Parker suggests that even those who endure the most repression have little tolerance for the emotionally vulnerable, for those who feel the deepest as they struggle alone. It is possible that Parker herself experienced this reaction after her personal efforts to kill herself and only responded with jokes because she sensed her actual pain would be denied. To be sure, Hazel appears to accept Nettie's refusal to console and, deflated, without another attempt to explain herself, asks for a drink, reverting to old patterns of drowning out the sadness with alcohol. The story ends with Hazel toasting her housekeeper and Nettie's friendly encouragement that whisky would cheer her up. Parker's final sentence: “‘Yeah,’ said Mrs. Morse. ‘Sure’” (Parker 124) implies sarcasm and dutiful repression in its flatness. By the end of the piece, Hazel has fully transitioned to numbness, realizing that even death by choice is beyond reach, and that she should never express emotion, thereby acquiescing to the removal of all productive agency.

This same disheartening lesson to hold feelings inside repeats itself in multiple short stories by Parker, particularly within the piece written four years later in 1933 and first published in *Harper's Bazaar*, fittingly titled “Sentiment.” Like “Big Blonde,” this short story contains romantic snub and a distaste toward emotion at its core. But its narrative follows a divergent structure with its confessional, stream-of-consciousness framework. The entire piece takes place on a cab ride that inadvertently transports the speaker to her old New York City neighborhood,
or so she thinks at first. Mentally, she talks to herself during this journey, which is both a physical as well as an emotional excursion. Parker indicates the speaker's only verbal interactions in italics, amounting to brief instructions to the taxi driver. As the car weaves through traffic, the speaker sees everything through the forlorn prism of her broken relationship. Even a tired-looking pedestrian passing by on the sidewalk prompts the speaker's concern as she expresses an inner empathy for what appears to be a working-class woman with limited means. This observation sparks the speaker's anger as she imagines how her former partner might have reacted to noting a weary stranger on the street:

“Oh, for heaven's sake!” he would say, “Can't you stop that fool sentimentalizing? Why do you have to do it? Why do you want to do it? Just because you see an old charwoman on the street, there's no need to go sobbing about her.” (Parker 196)

The rage that this narrator feels at her ex-boyfriend's attempts to discourage even the most mild, non-threatening emotions reveals the deeply-rooted resentment that she carries with her toward him. Similar to Hazel, who views her worth through men's eyes, this speaker demonstrates the same tendency. Her former boyfriend's opinion influences her own self-confidence. Though as this story continues, the heroine begins to disagree with her past love, at least in the privacy of her personal thoughts, as she embarks on a journey to find her authentic self. In the process, this speaker questions why such a stigma exists about demonstrating sensitivity:

I wonder why it's wrong to be sentimental. People are so contemnptuous of feeling. “You wouldn't catch me sitting alone and mooning,” they say. “Moon” is what they say when they mean remember, and they are so proud of not remembering. It's strange, how they pride themselves upon their lacks. “I never take anything seriously,” they say. “I simply couldn't imagine,” they say. “No one person could be that important to me.” And why, why do they think they're right? (Parker 196)

With her ideas flowing quickly, almost breathlessly, the speaker cannot fathom the reasons behind a proud embrace of avoidance. In addition, it further upsets her that the “people” she
refers to are so confident that their narrow-mindedness represents the correct stance with no room for an opposing viewpoint. Her questions about the negative reaction to feeling suggest that this outlook, in all its abstractness, has never been explained to her in any detail. It is simply considered an accepted fact, which bothers this narrator. Because she cannot grasp the reasoning behind a blanket rejection of an emotional perspective, the narrator must necessarily exist as an outsider and the amazement that she expresses supports her marginal position within this realm.

As her monologue continues, now even more uncensored in its emotion yet calmly analytical at the same time, the narrator begins to comprehend how alienation developed between herself and this past love. Her thoughts move from fury to an awareness of the obvious differences that separate their responses to the world. Lifting the veil of her glorification of this man's opinions, she recognizes instances of his shallowness. For instance, the speaker recounts her ex-partner's assumptions that a shopping trip could somehow fix their problems, erasing the emotions that he wanted so much to evade. Such an idea on his part also implies dismissive sexist beliefs about women and a willingness to make generalizations that conveniently obliterate the need to understand his girlfriend as an individual with any true depth. Processing these realities, the speaker realizes the blatant deficit that has come into view due to her intense reflections. Now that she can see this former love more clearly, the narrator possesses the confidence to argue for an existence that contains emotion, that demonstrates an enhanced understanding of oneself:

It's sentimental to know that you cannot bear to see the places where once all was well with you, that you cannot bear reminders of a dead loveliness. Sorrow is tranquility remembered in emotion. It - oh, I think that's quite good. “Remembered in emotion.” - that's a really nice reversal. I wish I could say it to him. But I won't say anything to him, ever again, ever, ever again. He's gone and it's over, and I dare not think of the dead days. (Parker 198)
Although the narrator mourns the end of this relationship, her assertion of sentiment's importance to an enjoyable life illustrates a philosophical departure from the mainstream disapproval this ex-lover represents. Accepting that she views emotion in a much different light than him, knowing this places her outside the universal parameters that society so often applies, the speaker faces a new reality that will eventually culminate with her ultimate acknowledgment of their failed relationship. In the case of this story, Parker points out the value of existing on the outside, how it can be mentally healthier to reject a majority view, even if it means that estrangement on some level must be part of the bargain.

In the story's final pages, the narrator returns to the present and feels horrified when she recognizes the neighborhood outside her taxi cab's window, emotions rushing at her during this unplanned excursion. Horrified, she pleads to herself: “Oh, why can't I be let to die as we pass through?” (Parker 198). Flooded with memories of the smallest details while driving by, the narrator feels tormented to see the place she had once considered to be her home with the very man who rejected her. Even as the speaker covers her eyes, she can still see certain trees and buildings that distinguished this area from other neighborhoods. The pain of knowing this familiar street no longer represents her safe haven inspires more wishes of death to escape such agony. It is only when she opens her eyes again that the narrator notices unusual characteristics of the vicinity. After questioning her driver, she discovers they are traveling down Sixty-Fifth, not Sixty-Third as she had imagined. The story ends with that misinterpretation resolved, where the speaker's near-breakdown escalated due to blind emotion alone, Parker fuses a twist of ironic humor into this abrupt conclusion, which tempers the angst. Still, an undercurrent of wandering, of neglecting to find actual safety in the form of a stable and understanding home reverberate
through this story. The message could be that liberating emotion in modern society, while cathartic, can lead to the tragic alienation this speaker faces without even the slightest hint of support. Ross Labrie observes that Parker frequently focuses on the societal tortures women must endure, complicated by their own flaws: “Amidst such pathos, Dorothy Parker has her eye unflinchingly on the potential cruelty of the ardent woman, in addition of course to the obvious self-indulgence” (Labrie 53-54). Indeed, Parker carefully depicts the world's tyrannical nature toward women with an underlying sympathy, which contextualizes facets of alienation. Yet she does not overlook how her women characters can contribute to their individual miseries either and portrays certain neuroticisms in romantic relationships that add relevant balance to the notion of victimhood.

Like “Sentiment,” Parker relies on a monologue of similar structure for her 1932 story titled “Lady with a Lamp,” where isolation and hysteria intersect to create a complex, layered otherness of rejected, painfully abandoned womanhood. First published in Harper's Bazaar, the most intriguing innovation of this piece is that Parker's true heroine never speaks. Mona Morrison, a bedridden young woman at the story's center, comes into focus through the lively monologue of the protagonist's nameless friend who stops by to visit. In fact, Mona's desolation appears as a sharp contrast to the well-intentioned yet intrusive, gossipy, and strident speaker, an ironic representation of judgmental womanhood mixed with patronizing concern. She admonishes Mona for not demanding better care for herself while simultaneously revealing her own ignorant bigotry:

Ah, to think of you going through all this and crawling off here all alone like a little wounded animal or something. And with only that colored Edie to take care of you. Darling, oughtn't you have a trained nurse, I mean really oughtn’t you? There must be many things that have to be done for you. (Parker 145)
Parker paints a vivid picture of Mona, regarding both her independence and wretchedness, through the narrator's lecture. She also provides a revealing window into intolerance due to the speaker's racist attitude, sweetly disguised with an insincere solicitude. Interestingly, though, while dismissing Edie's worth because of her race, casting her as an outsider for no other apparent reason, the speaker also divulges Mona's vulnerability by comparing her to an injured animal. The implication throughout this story is that the narrator's stereotypical notion of a fulfilled woman has no real place in Mona's world, even as she suffers. While busy sewing, this narrator proceeds to reprimand Mona for not having the expected lifestyle that a woman should:

Oh, Mona, dear, so often I think if you just had a home of your own, and could be all busy, making pretty little things like this for it, it would do so much for you. I worry so about you, living in a little furnished apartment, with nothing that belongs to you, no roots, no nothing. It’s not right for a woman. It’s all wrong for a woman like you. Oh, I wish you’d get over that Garry McVicker! If you could just meet some nice, sweet, considerate man, and get married to him, and have your own lovely place - and with your taste, Mona! - and maybe have a couple of children. You're so simply adorable with children. (Parker 146)

Her chiding, which blends prior knowledge of Mona's personal life with an undercurrent of criticism of her circumstances, shows the divergence between these two women. The speaker, a much more conventional representation of womanhood, indirectly labels Mona as an outsider in terms of her membership in this unstated society. Because Mona lacks her own home and a husband, she embodies an otherness that makes this narrator uncomfortable and judgmental. Indeed, the speaker shows no hesitation in lightly condemning Mona's choices because they are beyond the norm, though her friend never asks for her opinion on the matter. As the speaker urges Mona to transition to a more traditional life, she notices Mona has begun to cry. As she affectionately chastises her for using a pink chiffon handkerchief instead of cleansing tissues, Mona's differences are defined further alongside her unhappy reaction to the narrator's lecture.
Perhaps Mona's emotional response occurs because she wishes to have the feminine trappings that the narrator wishes for her.

To make matters even worse, the story's speaker only deepens the divide further by continuing to criticize Mona's life with more pointed criticisms that intensify the alienation rather than promote any kind of unity. The narrator tells Mona how often she has told Fred, presumably her own husband, how Mona should get married:

Honestly, you don’t know the feeling it gives you, just to be all secure and safe with your own sweet home and your own blessed children, and your own nice husband coming back to you every night. That’s a woman’s life, Mona. What you’ve been doing is really horrible. Just drifting along, that’s all. What’s going to happen to you, dear, whatever is going to become of you? (Parker 146)

Parker's narrator comes across as a meddler and only makes Mona more sympathetic in her evident fragility, though she still shows an independence that resonates strength at the same time. By never encouraging the speaker and voicing her objections, even in this emotional state, Mona maintains an autonomy from her friend's old-fashioned assumptions about women's roles. Furthermore, in this second reference to making a home, the narrator, once again, implies that Mona not only suffers from an abnormal womanhood, but she also lacks any anchor, reinforcing the notion of her outsider status. Then as this monologue progresses, Parker seamlessly uses the speaker to disclose Garry's cruel lies, revealing how he dates other women behind Mona's back, another repudiation of her womanhood. In addition, and much more indirectly, the nature of Mona's actual condition comes together through a series of fragments intercut with the narrator's placating attempts to calm her friend's increasing agitation. Buried in seemingly mild small talk about Mona's doctor leads to the narrator's statement: “You did the only possible thing, I think” (Parker 148), and followed by the heroine's emotional, unrestrained reaction, the reality of
abortion rises to the surface. The narrator does little to soothe her friend beyond demanding that she stop her screams and be quiet: “Just lie back and rest, and have a nice talk” (Parker 148).

Seconds after trying to end this outburst, the narrator gossips about Garry and his other girlfriend, even describing how good he looks. When the speaker notices Mona begin to cry again, she chastises her with the remark: “that's just plain silly” (Parker 149), blissfully unaware of her role in inspiring this emotion while trying to suppress it at the same time. With the mistaken idea that she is somehow helping Mona, the narrator becomes more aggressive and attacks Garry while, once again, referring to the abortion in veiled terms:

When I think of him out having the time of his life and you lying here deathly sick all on account of him, I could just – Yes, it is on account of him. Even if you didn’t have an – well, even if I was mistaken about what I naturally thought was the matter with you when you made such a secret of your illness, he’s driven you into a nervous breakdown, and that’s plenty bad enough. All for that man! The skunk! You just put him right out of your head. (Parker 149)

Tensions rising, Mona's interjections can almost be heard in this portion of the narrator's monologue. While the narrator urges Mona to forget about Garry, she inflames emotions, blames her friend for choosing privacy over broadcasting her trauma, and then commands the story's true protagonist to forget everything, as if the circumstances can simply be erased.

Through this satirical portrait of supportive womanhood, Parker demonstrates the constrictions involved in such a toxic relationship, where a rigid sense of femininity cause more harm in the form of intensified division. Mona's otherness shifts into even clearer focus at the same time as her legitimate emotions are subject to thoughtless constraint. Indeed, Mona tries to express authentic feeling, but her emotions are outside of society's prescriptive gender roles of this era. That tension worsens with her companion's constant attempts to massage Mona back into the social norm through her monologue. Meg Gillette notes that Parker makes the core
argument through Mona that sentiment represents a quintessential human value, one which should be reintroduced into modern literature:

Thus, while high modernists sought (famously) to leave sentimentalism behind, “Lady with a Lamp” seeks to bring sentimentalism back. Writing its aborting woman as a sentimental heroine, the modern heir of a sentimental tradition, “Lady with a Lamp” detaches sentiment from its outmoded Victorian sexual politics and claims its applicability to questions posed by modern sexuality and reproduction. (Gillette 165)

Parker shows that Mona's circumstances warrant her strong emotions, giving her the right to feel deeply despite the disapproval of her companion. She becomes particularly sympathetic in comparison to the austere yet eager busybody who exacerbates Mona's sentiments to the point of hysteria. As Gillette observes, Parker redefines sentimentalism with her portrait of Mona, removing it from Victorian standards to prove its significance in the modern world.

Predictably, the narrator's efforts to quell Mona's increased distress fail and make matters worse, where her friend's obvious sadness turns into an emotional crisis of supreme devastation. At this point, the narrator must resort to calling out to Edie, Mona's housekeeper, the very person she had earlier disparaged, to resolve a catastrophe of her own making. This story concludes with Mona in a frenzy and the speaker frantically unable to calm the situation. Though Edie does not appear before the story's close, she seems reminiscent of Nettie in “Big Blonde,” a caretaker who is also an outsider and likely the one person who shows genuine concern for Parker's given protagonist, a less perceptible example of otherness herself. It is interesting to note that Parker, once again, equates the estrangement of a White woman with the racism endured by an African-American counterpart, though not with the same detail or development. She shows that an

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29 In the 2007 article “Bedside Manners in Dorothy Parker's 'Lady with a Lamp' and Kay Boyle's My Next Bride,” Gillette looks at how each author treats abortion in the context of the eras of their respective tales.
affinity exists on some level, where even an individual who appears connected to mainstream society can deeply suffer from alienation. This notion represents her personal experience of an invisible banishment, enabling her to commiserate, often assigning greater emotional development and compassion to characters on the margins of society.

Indeed, Parker shapes and then modifies various illustrations of the outsider throughout her stories, not simply focusing on the piece's main character or primary perspective alone to delineate the complexities of exclusion. Her 1924 short story “Mr. Durant” offers a good example of Parker's capability to adapt numerous versions of an outcast. Originally published in *American Mercury*, this piece also explores abortion, without ever articulating the term, and demonstrates how the sexually predatory nature of her protagonist Mr. Durant chooses women with less power, without his financial means, and of a lower class in order to preserve his control. Married with children and almost fifty, he begins an affair with Rose, a worker sent to type some of his letters, and views their after-hours trysts in his office as quite natural. He can enjoy these nightly encounters without ever having to relinquish his interest in other women, whom he sees in mere physical terms:

> It was all so simple that Mr. Durant never thought of it as anything outside the usual order of things. His interest in Rose did not blunt his appreciation of chance attractive legs or provocative glances. It was an entanglement of the most restful, comfortable nature. It even held a sort of homelike quality, for him. (Parker 26)

Parker depicts Mr. Durant's easy ability to dehumanize women as body parts designed to please him, where he feels free to disregard any real responsibility for their welfare at the same time. Therefore, when Rose becomes pregnant, his indifference to her tears comes as no surprise. According to Meade, Parker based this story on her own traumatic experience of abortion, which
occurred in 1922 after a melodramatic, quite public affair with playwright and Algonquin Round Table acquaintance Charles MacArthur, leading to one of her suicide attempts. Meade claims: “The need to write this story must have been intense“ (Meade 131) because of the emotional and physical distress of these circumstance. In Gillette's view, this work “...makes a public critique of the dearth of sympathy available to women having abortions” (Gillette 163). With the entire story from Mr. Durant's perspective, he represents American society's cold attitude toward women who need this procedure. His self-indulgent actions force Rose into the actual predicament, where he epitomizes the exploiter, the employer, and the judge of this sexual victim at once. Indeed, Parker's narration portrays Mr. Durant's complete lack of compassion or accountability: “All his energies were expended in urging her for God’s sake to keep quiet; he did not ask her what was the matter. But it came out, between bursts of unpleasant-sounding sobs. She was ‘in trouble’” (Parker 26). Rose's usefulness to Mr. Durant ends when proof of his abuse of power potentially threatens his own prosperity, an anxious fixation that causes great worry. This predicament, which poses a considerable risk to Rose due to her young, unmarried status and lack of steady work to support a family, never occurs to Mr. Durant. With the entire story told from his perspective, Mr. Durant represents American society's cold attitude toward the weaker and less connected. Parker portrays a world that permits those in control to prey on individuals who exist along the outer edges, even benefiting from such actions beyond their established power. Mr. Durant's duty concludes with the twenty-five-dollar-cost of the procedure, thanks to Rose's roommate and her ability to manage all of the details. So Mr. Durant retains his liberty, where he continues to capitalize on his extracurricular sexual interests without shame.
Though Parker resists any exploration of Rose's thoughts, this character epitomizes the helplessness of the outsider as a target of an authority figure's abuse. To make these circumstances even worse, the abortion necessitates that Rose leave her job, an added inconvenience that Mr. Durant never has to experience. Her departure offers him relief for she can disappear into the fringes again, doubtful to cause any danger to his societal prominence in the future. A similar kind of power structure, where the woman possesses little agency, exists in Parker's 1932 story “Horsie,” originally published by Harper's Bazaar. Mistreatment toward an outsider, whose physical disadvantages unfairly outweigh the victim's professional abilities, takes this tale to otherness territory. Told mainly from the perspective of Gerald Kruger, a young husband whose wife has just given birth to the couple's first child, the story focuses on his acute discomfort around Miss Wilmarth, the hired nurse. Despite Miss Wilmarth's exceptional training and considerate caretaking skills while Camilla, Gerald's wife, recovers, she secretly becomes a source of heartless mockery. The ridicule stems from the fact that her features resemble those of a horse. Parker's narrative reflects compassion for this woman, who works with competence and never shows any self-consciousness about her physical attributes. Indeed, Parker puts the blame solely on Gerald's superficial fixation. Immediately after describing Miss Wilmarth's “big, trustworthy hands” (Parker 170), she describes Gerald's disgust toward this feature when he eats dinner across from her each evening, with meals prepared for them by kitchen staff. Gerald views Miss Wilmarth's hands as an affront: “It irritated him to be reminded by their sight that they must feel like straw matting and smell of white soap. For him, women who were not softly lovely were simply not women” (Parker 170). Although Miss Wilmarth lives with an unappealing appearance, Gerald possesses the true ugliness in this story.
Cruelty and an almost compulsive need to exclude weave through Parker's piece, where Miss Wilmarth is the unknowing recipient of contempt, thrust to the outskirts of acceptance, even though she provides kind care for this wealthy family. During a private visit with his wife in her room, where the doctor has restricted her, Gerald complains about Miss Wilmarth. His protest does not involve Miss Wilmarth's ability because she shows great skill without ever causing problems in the household. The source of Gerald's irritation focuses strictly on her horse-like aspect. He exclaims to Camilla: “All I say is, nobody has any business to go around looking like a horse and behaving as if it were all right. You don't catch horses going around looking like people, do you?” (Parker 171). Gerald's obsessiveness over Miss Wilmarth's outward impression shows not just a shallow disregard for another human being, but also the entitlement of an individual accustomed to the world fitting snugly around him. He lives in a bubble, insulated against anything or anyone that might potentially make him rethink his provincial ideas of worthiness. Miss Wilmarth thus becomes a target of his ire, though she always behaves with courtesy and affection. Although Parker's narration concedes that he does not dislike Miss Wilmarth, Gerald does feel a growing irritation and fury at her presence, which manifests in his dread over eating dinner with this nurse every evening.

By contrast, Gerald's wife represents perfect loveliness, the ideal of feminine beauty yet beyond Gerald's reach because of the prescribed bedrest, which unleashes his passive-aggressive frustration onto the defenseless, isolated Miss Wilmarth even more. He brings friends home for the evening to avoid another awkward dinner with his employee and they gather in Camilla's room for some social drinking. In this instance, Parker switches the point of view to Miss Wilmarth, who only hears friendly laughter and interactions through the nursery wall as she
cares for the newborn. There is a sadness to her listening, an implication that she understands her separateness and wishes it could be different, though without any bitterness toward the people together in the next room. Parker indicates the division between these two worlds and deepens Miss Wilmarth's outsider role with an understated empathy that reinforces the nurse's integrity further. As Miss Wilmarth hears Gerald's animated voice, she cannot distinguish the actual words. But Parker immediately returns to Gerald's perspective to catch his savage remark: “'Only wait, fellers,' he said. 'Wait till you see Seabiscuit'” (Parker 175). Unaware of the utter disrespect he shows, Gerald feels no qualms about exhibiting his heartlessness outside of the household as well. This constant scorn comes to an end when Camilla heals and Miss Wilmarth can finally leave, causing Gerald's delight. In his eagerness to rid the house of Miss Wilmarth, he buys both Camilla and the family's nurse flowers to celebrate. Miss Wilmarth feels touched by the gesture and opens up about her life, which is much more modest than the Kruger family's affluent circumstances. As she describes the starkness of living in cramped quarters with her mother and aunt, displaying no grievances, Gerald mentally responds in judgment:

   Even in her leisure, then, Miss Wilmarth was a disruption and a crowd. Never dwelling in a room that had been planned only for her occupancy; no bed, no corner of her own; dressing before other people's mirrors, touching other people's silver, never looking out one window that was hers. Well. Doubtless she had known nothing else for so long that she did not mind or even ponder. (Parker 181)

Although Gerald sees Miss Wilmarth's life in negative terms, the image his musings provide demonstrate honesty and uprightness, a person who does not ask for much. Furthermore, her situation underscores the reality of Miss Wilmarth's very otherness, where her life lacks the anchor of the kind of solid, stable household that both Gerald and Camilla take for granted.
without visible appreciation. Miss Wilmarth's kindness and humility shine in the story's last moments when, after Gerald rushes her into the car he hired to drive her home, she thinks about the flowers he presented to her earlier: “They were her flowers. A man had given them to her. She had been given flowers. They might not fade maybe for days. And she could keep the box” (Parker 183). Parker's empathic portrayal of a woman with moral strength and goodness that is overshadowed by an eccentricity she cannot control, shows this author's great depth of understanding. The fact that Miss Wilmarth can also see the best in people despite the disconnection that pervades her life illustrates a capacity that Gerald, a man equipped with wealth and societal approval, but frivolous values, wholly lacks. Indeed, Parker shows otherness to be an encouraging alternative to a thoughtless society that promotes appearances above substance. Ross Labrie reinforces this notion: “The vulnerability of women who have never had or who have lost their beauty and therefore their ticket to survival is a persistent, sardonic theme in Dorothy Parker” (Labrie 52). In this way, Parker demonstrates the superficiality of American values, where physical appeal remains an absurdly elevated deciding factor of a woman's inclusion or exclusion within her immediate world. That context provides the perfect climate to generate such abject exclusion.

As a collection, “Big Blonde,” “Sentiment,” “Lady with a Lamp,” “Mr. Durant,” and “Horsie” all scrutinize aspects of the outsider from a variety of angles, in which Parker explores how alienation operates and deepens divisions within personal relationships as well as American society. Otherness entwines throughout each story on some level, highlighting ostracization, but often in not so obvious manners, particularly when complicated by social class or race. However, Parker wrote two stories that concentrate on racist prejudice alone, underscoring the core
alienation with no other layers of otherness to mitigate the impact. “Arrangement in Black and White” (1927) and “Clothe the Naked” (1938) handle intolerance in much more of a direct manner than the previously mentioned works. But while racism remains at the center, Parker blends this discrimination with an artfully written texture of fierce disapproval as well as a poignant empathy, further highlighting the injustice she confronts. Indeed, both stories are the closest Parker ever comes to addressing cultural bigotry and she does not falter in her criticism. Because the main characters are African American and suffer from discrimination in divergent circumstances yet equally humiliating ways, Parker's censure of cultural estrangement and the abuse that radiates stay at the forefront of both works. Still, these stories exist at opposite ends of the spectrum, where the first piece qualifies as a satire of Caucasian ignorance and the second offers a much more serious treatment of racist abuse. However, both works are an indictment of what Parker viewed as American society's eagerness to exclude those who do not qualify for mainstream acceptance. Because she quietly and secretly identified as a cultural outsider, her compassionate advocacy for the characters in these stories shines bright, even through the glimpses of ironic humor, which represent the classic Parker touch.

In fact, “Arrangement in Black and White,” originally published by *The New Yorker*, maintains a satiric tone because of the main character's comical failure to treat an African American person with humanity, cultivating further cultural divisions. Parker demonstrates this ignorance through the story's unlikely protagonist, who remains nameless throughout, and situates this woman at an event celebrating the musical accomplishment of a Black man. While this primary character embodies the story's central action, she has no moniker, making her existence generic and not worth delineating in any individual sense. By contrast, Parker names
the African American singer Walter Williams, which illustrates the dignity of his specific identity, which the woman fails to earn with her racism. Nondescript except for the pink velvet poppies on her hat, this female character, an avid, though uncomfortable, fan of the musician, takes the party's host aside. She then begs to be introduced to Walter Williams. Before actually meeting him, however, the woman makes animated claims about her own enlightenment, lightly scoffing at her absent husband Burton as the real racist of her household. Unaware of the intolerance that flows so easily out of her mouth, she gushes with a bigoted observation to the host: “‘Well, I said to Burton, ‘It’s a good thing for you Walter Williams is colored,’ I said, ‘or you’d have lots of reason to be jealous’” (Parker 77). This thoughtless remark implies Walter Williams' inferiority due to his skin color, disqualifying him from any romantic competition with the woman's husband. During this largely one-sided conversation, the woman continues to assert that she has an open mind. Her defensiveness suggests that she feels uncertain about her own level of acceptance. In her protestations, though, she continually fumbles with statements that dehumanize the African American race. At one point, she states: “‘I haven’t the slightest feeling about colored people. Why, I’m just crazy about some of them. They’re just like children – just as easy-going, and always singing and laughing and everything. Aren’t they the happiest things you ever saw in your life?’” (Parker 78). Again, without ever realizing it, the woman inaccurately simplifies this entire ethnicity, glossing over the genuine adversity African Americans face. In an anemic effort to appear supportive, she also attempts to absolve herself of any potential responsibility for their hardship with insincere platitudes. Furthermore, by characterizing a race of people, one that is historically oppressed, in such an absurd, cartoonish
light, she can avoid awkward discomfort, even a private shame, and pretend Black individuals are content in society to relieve her conscience.

Once the woman finally meets Walter Williams, whom she claims to admire with such exuberance, this character reverts to her racist tendencies, ignoring his musical ability in favor of the otherness affixed to all African Americans in her universe. Even though she gushes about Walter Williams's talents at the party, this distinction cannot overcome his status as an eternal outsider who must remain at a lower level than herself within society. When the host whisks her away to prevent a potential disaster, the woman shares her feelings about this introduction and unknowingly exposes even more discriminatory reflections. She demonstrates a complete lack of awareness in her remarks: “Why, he’s awfully nice. Just as nice as he can be. Nice manners, and everything. You know, so many colored people, you give them an inch, and they walk all over you. But he doesn’t try any of that. Well, he’s got more sense, I suppose” (Parker 80). White entitlement exists at the heart of her observations, an instinctive assumption that Caucasian society holds the strings of authority. Therefore, as long as African Americans know their place in the hierarchy, never demanding more, they can be honored by the dominant culture. Ironically, this nameless woman without any known accomplishments views herself as superior to the Black singer she feels so eager to meet. Parker addresses this twisted reasoning with the sardonic edge it deserves. As a final reinforcement of the woman's entrenched supremacy, this nameless character expresses amusement at telling Burton that she used the respectful term “Mister” while speaking with Walter Williams. The implication that Walter Williams should not be treated with any civility due to his race emphasizes preserving societal division for the sake of maintaining power.
A similar theme of racist oppression flows through Parker's story “Clothe the Naked,” first published by Scribner's, but her critique of such estrangement replaces satire with heartbreaking empathy. This work unfolds entirely from the perspective of Big Lannie, a hard-working woman who “went out by the day to the houses of secure and leisured ladies, to wash their silks and their linens” (Parker 244). Immediately, Parker establishes the contrast between the nature of Big Lannie's job, which involves traveling for work from one house to the next, and the upper-class women who hire her. They have a security denied to Big Lannie. Parker also describes Big Lannie's large size and, in explicit detail, paints a clear image of her skin color as “a sound brown-black save for her palms and the flat of her fingers that were like gutta-percha from steam and hot suds” (Parker 244). Unlike “Big Blonde” and “Lady with a Lamp,” where Parker never explicitly states that Nettie and Edie, respectively, are Black, but implies their racial identities, her narrative makes direct reference to Big Lannie's skin color. This detail underscores the dynamics between Big Lannie and her employers. It also adds another layer of difficulty to Big Lannie's existence, especially in relation to the numerous tragedies she suffered over the years. With a deceased husband and all but one of her children also dead during their youth, Big Lannie must endure an unkind world all by herself. Arlene, Big Lannie's only surviving offspring, often ran away over the years and wound up in trouble on a regular basis. In attempts to keep her safe and happy, Big Lannie would buy Arlene presents and show her plenty of love. But Arlene continued to disappear despite Big Lannie's numerous efforts, eventually passing away in the hospital during childbirth. Leaving behind a baby, Arlene insisted the child should be named Raymond, which Big Lannie honors. She takes Raymond home from the hospital after learning that the orphaned newborn will also need special care because he is blind. Unraveling
Big Lannie's tragic background, Parker's narration contains a factual tone, showing the loving, humble nature of her heroine, even throughout so many onerous circumstances.

Despite Big Lannie's quiet willingness to do her best for these rich women, when she asks for flexibility to care for Raymond, her employers instantly view her as a racist stereotype of the worst kind and a burden on their charitable natures. Parker offers snippets of the women's brutal and ignorant conversations about Big Lannie: “‘Honestly, those niggers!’ each said to her friends. ‘They're all alike’” (Parker 245). No matter how much she proves herself, Big Lannie will always be subject to dehumanizing remarks, even when she needs compassion, which only perpetuates the alienation and helplessness further. Yet Big Lannie never allows the harshness of the world to erase her capacity for gratitude. While the majority of women discard Big Lannie, one of these wealthy ladies does not go along with this heartless trend and continues to employ her. Because of Mrs. Ewing's kindness, Big Lannie feels immense gratitude: “More than ever Big Lannie had reason to call her blessed” (Parker 249). Similar to Miss Wilmarth in “Horsie,” another outsider, though not in as visible a manner, Big Lannie upholds a continual optimism and appreciation when society grants her a reprieve from hardship. She also shows gratitude toward those who are compassionate toward her.

Over the years, Big Lannie manages to raise Raymond on her own, receiving help from the neighbors, who assist in safeguarding her blind grandson and alleviating the isolation. But with money tight, Big Lannie has a hard time buying Raymond clothes as he continues to grow. His clothing ultimately turns into rags, which are too thin to keep him warm in the winter. So Big Lannie must keep him inside while she works, even though he loves to go out into the street, a habit he has developed, and not feel alone. To keep Raymond clothed, Big Lannie feels she has
no other alternative except to beg Mrs. Ewing for help. Although the thought humiliates her, she eventually asks Mrs. Ewing for any old clothes from her husband. Irritated, Mrs. Ewing lectures her, but then obliges with a package of clothing for Raymond. When Raymond finds out he now has new clothes, he feels more excited than ever to go outside. His eagerness makes him too impatient to wait for Big Lannie to return from work to enjoy the outdoor air. Although Parker establishes that Raymond had often walked down the building's stairs to stand outside without any issues in the past, this instance offers different circumstances. Instead of the customary safety, Raymond becomes the victim of a vicious attack that makes no sense to him. When Big Lannie comes home, she finds him on the floor and rushes over to her traumatized grandson. When he tries to explain, she simply cradles him to her: “But her voice was soft and her arms warm. Raymond's sobs softened, and trembled away. She held him, rocking silently and rhythmically, a long time. Then gently she set him on his feet, and took from his shoulders Mrs. Ewing's old full-dress coat” (Parker 251). Although the details of this attack are never described, the brutality fits into the overall adversity of Big Lannie's life. Furthermore, despite that continual misfortune, problems that all come back to the color of her skin, not due to any character flaw, Big Lannie refuses to complain or feel pity for herself. The final act of this story involves loving comfort without bitterness. While she must exist as a struggling outsider, Big Lannie refrains from fury, leaving Parker's narration to provide the understanding absent from society, generating outrage on her behalf that her heroine never exhibits.

The descriptive, informative tone within Parker's understated narrative reveals an emotional connection to Big Lannie's circumstances, where her otherness may feel familiar to the author in its poignancy. Perhaps this innate commiseration accounts for Parker's decision to
leave her estate to Martin Luther King, Junior. This donation, amounting to a total of $20,448.39, was a great surprise to King since he never personally met Parker. But Parker's lifelong struggle with feeling excluded, never finding a place to belong, made her especially sympathetic to the prejudice directed toward African Americans. While Parker's ethnic diversity lacked the same level of visibility, she did look different than her classmates in the Christian schools she attended as a young girl. This powerful sense of otherness stayed with Parker and eventually transformed into the thoughtfully articulated empathy that she applied to her stories. Exploring alienation, the validity of emotion, partriarchal restrictions, women's agency, and inhumanity, Parker's works are a study of the invisible struggle for identity. While Parker grew up with social advantages and obtained impressive literary connections as an adult, she never came to terms with her mixed ethnicity. Although toward the end of her life, Parker is famously known to have said that she “was just a little Jewish girl trying to be cute,” thereby identifying herself specifically with Judaism, she still viewed herself as an outsider. Even when she gained celebrity as a famed author beginning in the 1920s, the epitome of New York City sophistication and the queen of the Algonquin Round Table, Parker wrestled with her identity. Deliberately secretive about her Judaic ethnicity, she may have calculated that such confidentiality would be better preserve her literary reputation and publishing opportunities. What's more, by supposedly seeking and then retaining her generic marital name, Parker concealed her Jewish heritage with great success.

However, this guise did not extend to finding an authentic space for herself or ever heal

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30 This quote is often attributed to Parker, but without providing a clear idea of when, where, and how she allegedly conveyed the thought. However, in criticism, such as Scott Donaldson's 2016 article “Scott and Dottie,” as well as biographies, both book-form and online, these words are associated with her as something that Parker said later in life. In general, Parker tended to be very private about her ethnic background and Jewish roots.
the alienation that haunted Parker, from childhood until the end of her troubled life. Instead, she wandered, both physically and emotionally, weaving her way through dysfunctional relationships, several suicide attempts, sustained alcohol abuse, and multiple temporary residences in hotel rooms. As she grew older and more isolated, outliving husbands as well as friends and acquaintances from the Algonquin Round Table, she descended into an even deeper separateness. Ellen Lansky describes one of Parker's last recounted interactions at her final home in New York City's Volney Hotel, documented in John Keats's biography of the author.31 Her visitors found Parker sitting on a rug covered in dog feces, with bottles all around her. Lansky compares the similarities between Parker and Katherine Anne Porter, where both writers “finally sank into their alcoholism at the ends of their lives” (Lansky 227). Based on Parker's continued dependence on alcohol as well as other eccentricities that concerned her inability to take adequate care of herself, Barry Day believes that she likely suffered from mental illness. He states: “...there is little doubt that had she been able and willing to consult a specialist today, he would have diagnosed her condition as manic depression and put her on a course of anti-depressants” (Day 139). To be sure, Parker may have benefited from such medical intervention to feel more at ease with herself, unifying an ethnically unique identity she could never reconcile.

Yet Parker's personal struggle with otherness provides a rare comprehension of invisibility that she incorporates into her work with humor, authenticity, and impassioned advocacy. Although Parker never weaves facets of her Judaic individuality into these stories, her cultural knowledge prevails as a continual undercurrent that examines societal exclusion,

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31 In 1970, John Keats published a biography of Parker titled You Might as Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker. It is considered the first biography of Parker, though not necessarily the best.
particularly in the context of racial prejudice, with keen sensitivity. Furthermore, Parker's outspoken courage in speaking up against Nazism, as well as her involvement in social causes, forged meaningful connections with her Judaic heritage as a cultural identity. In this context, where activism and support for the voiceless unite, Parker's writing offers profound relevance in the study of Jewish-American women authors, even though she chose not to recognize her ethnic roots. Because she grew up in a family that ignored the complexity of its religious heritage and her relatives indirectly expressed shame about their Judaic lineage, Parker never resolved her personal Jewish identity. As a result, Parker's lifelong inability to reconcile her unique ethnicity generated an intricate otherness that she could not overcome. But this very alienation provides a poignant empathy that entwines through her body of work. She offers a powerful perspective that represents cultural alienation and enhances the genre of Judaic literature because of its satiric strength, feminist awareness, and demand for justice. Furthermore, Parker shows how Judaic culture, in all of its forms on the spectrum of Jewish identification, has an important presence in American literary study and warrants acknowledgment. Though Parker herself did not find her ultimate sanctuary, where she could feel the comfort of complete cultural belonging, she offers a perspective directly informed by an effort to understand and come to terms with her own Judaic ancestry, ultimately defining the estrangement that she experienced. Indeed, Dorothy Parker, a crucial writer within the complex range of Jewish-American women authors, deserves recognition for her contributions to this genre of contemporary American literature.
CHAPTER THREE:

GRACE PALEY’S COMMUNITY ACTIVISM AS RESISTANCE TO CULTURAL ALIENATION

Although both Anzia Yezierska and Dorothy Parker endured nearly lifelong struggles to achieve belonging, Grace Paley did not encounter the same level of emotional anguish on her journey. Furthermore, of the three Jewish women authors, Paley experienced the most personal and professional support for her writing as well as the ability to establish a distinctive sanctuary for herself. Much of Paley's capacity to bypass the alienation suffered by Yezierska and Parker derived from her impassioned belief in community, where she viewed such hospitable connections as a strategy to resist the estrangement caused by marginalization. Raised with a socialist mindset, where her Jewish identity emerged from cultural values rather than prescribed Judaic practice, Paley pushed for neighborhood involvement as a safeguard against ethnic divisions. Therefore, she urged efforts to unify diverse groups together as opposed to accepting isolation. In addition to her dedicated community advocacy, Paley devoted herself to social action projects inspired by local causes in the Bronx and extending to national issues around the country. Eventually, her determined endeavors broadened to the expansive promotion of ethical government principles on an international level. Paley's impassioned participation in anti-war protests, women's rights movements, and other related demonstrations designed to give voice to oppressed groups significantly reduced the desolation that Yezierska and Parker each experienced. Moreover, Paley received continued encouragement from a robust network that
included longtime, close women friends from her neighborhood and activist peers, who also
shared her vehemence for socialist approaches.

Even though she had a wonderful support network, Paley coped with her own challenges
on the path to distinguishing herself as an important Jewish writer. She dealt with the
disappointments of her parents and intellectual insecurities leading to depression and multiple
withdrawals from university programs as well as the eventual separation and subsequent divorce
from her first husband. More perplexing still, her intensive commitment to activism, expressed as
a vision of an America that embraces equal rights, peace, and morality, did not significantly alter
society's patriarchal mindset, to the detriment of America's best interests. Yet Paley never
stopped investing tremendous time and care into these crucial movements to minimize social
alienation. In fact, adding her voice to causes that mattered took precedence over Paley's own
physical health. During the spring of 2007, just months before her death from breast cancer at the
age of eighty-four and while undergoing chemotherapy treatments, she still assembled her
limited energy to protest the surge of American troops in Iraq.\footnote{In a May 1, 2007 article from the Books section of \textit{The New Yorker}, staff writer Alexandra Schwartz revealed this
telling detail about Paley within her piece titled “The Art and Activism of Grace Paley.”} Driving with her second husband, poet and activist Bob Nichol, from their Vermont home to Burlington, Paley took advantage of
this opportunity to be heard despite her own frailty. Few obstacles impeded Paley's passion to
advocate for peaceful measures as a solution to societal conflicts. Whenever possible, she
championed the preservation of all forms of life over any type of violence. Paley's short stories,
poetry, speeches, and global demonstrations attest to her immense empathy, a characteristic that
wondrously elevates her work with its fusion of kindness, continual conversation, and humor. By
carefully recreating voice, listening to divergent perspectives so as to represent them accurately,
and developing an appreciation of community to combat ethnic estrangement, Paley imagines an America that reflects the values she views as ideal. Although the overall culture ultimately overlooked Paley's anti-war arguments and fervent urgings for more inclusivity, the principles she describes offer an important vantage point that transcends the nation's aggressive tendencies. In addition, Paley left a body of pivotal works that lovingly fuses her Judaic heritage, key autobiographical details, and a social awareness, which continue to make a positive impact on audiences to this day.

Born on December 11, 1922, Grace Goodside Paley's unexpected arrival generated a whirlwind of surprise to her large, extended family, which had relocated from Russia nearly twenty years earlier to The Bronx in New York City. According to Paley biographer Judith Arcana,² siblings Victor and Jeanne, ages sixteen and fourteen respectively, were shocked because their new baby sister appeared out of nowhere. Thirty-seven years later, Paley would create a similar stir with the emergence of her first collection of short stories _The Little Disturbances of Man_ (1959), artfully heightening Judaism, liberal politics, and womanhood into the literary spotlight. Paley's sudden birth within the family home and her mother's modest secrecy throughout the pregnancy astonished her brother and sister, who were already preparing for their own departures into the larger world. Since they were both so much older than Paley, the future author grew up as an only child to a great extent. She lived in an active household

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² Arcana is widely considered to be Paley's official biographer. While attending Loyola University Chicago, Arcana completed her dissertation _Grace Paley: Life and Stories_ in 1989. Then in 1993, Arcana expanded upon her dissertation with the publication titled _Grace Paley's Life Stories_. For this book, Arcana conducted extensive interviews with the author herself, spending many hours with her. In addition, Arcana interviewed Paley's children Nora and Danny, her ex-husband Jesse, and her siblings Victor and Jeanne. In the process, Arcana and Paley also became friends. But this friendship did not interfere with Arcana's ability to write about Paley objectively. Furthermore, Arcana offers important criticisms about contradictions and even inconsistencies in the way Paley viewed herself and her life choices.
filled with numerous, highly opinioned adults who often discussed socialist politics, providing an important foundation for Paley's own perspectives on advocacy. This topic, a passionate subject among the Goodside clan, derived from the family's own turbulent and tragic history, where relatives, beginning with Paley's parents, fled from the Ukraine in 1905. Her father Isaac Gutseit and her mother Manya Ridnyik had lived in a town called Vzovka then and were both Jewish socialists. Because of their activism against the anti-Jewish cruelty and extreme violence displayed by Russia's government, they were expelled by Czar Nicholas II. As a result, Gutseit was sent to Siberia while Ridnyik got banished to Germany. Fortunately, though, in honor of the czar's newborn son, the couple secured amnesty and returned to the Ukraine. In Paley's 1998 book of essays, speeches, poetry, and short fiction titled Just As I Thought, widely considered to be her autobiography, the author describes her parents' background as political prisoners. Within the opening pages of her introduction, Paley discusses how she gained an avid awareness of social causes as a child due to her parents' heroic activism during their youth in Russia:

I didn't have to work my way toward a sudden awakening in revolutionary amazement. I knew from an early age that my father had been imprisoned in common local jails in Russia and then in Siberia at Archangel, that my mother had been sent into exile, and that both were released when the Czar had a son. Prisoners under twenty-one were sent home – probably just in time for the 1905 revolution and more pogroms. (Paley xiii)

Although Paley never witnessed her parents' courageous determination firsthand, their willingness to stand up to Russian authorities, fighting against the systematic massacre of Jews

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3 Although scholars and critics view this book as Paley's autobiography, the author qualifies that label in a clear and straightforward manner. Within her introduction, she states that the text is “not an autobiographical collection, but it is about my life” (Paley xiii). Her clarification is fitting because the individual pieces within this text reflect certain significant moments in her life and deliberately avoid a chronological progression. While organized in sectioned time periods, the actual pieces often overlap in the subject matter and the life episodes that they recount. Furthermore, these essays reiterate specific themes, focusing on the topics that matter to Paley the most, including womanhood, political activism, and cultural aspects of Judaism as well as details about her own familial history dating back to her Eastern European roots.
to assert their rights, made a crucial, lifelong impression on the author. This apparent bravery also generated the fundamental basis for Paley's own active commitment to social causes, where she willingly risked her freedom to voice dissent, questioning injustices that she perceived. By the time Paley knew her parents, they did not share her emboldened mindset. Well into middle-age, they focused on attaining financial security for the family and enjoying a comfortable life in America, not causing political havoc. After their traumatic survival of Russia's violent anti-Semitism, they were grateful for the opportunities America offered to immigrants. Indeed, Paley lacked her parents' frightening experience, where their appreciation of this new world originated.

In 1905, seventeen years before Paley's birth, her parents were given permission to return to Russia after their exile. But Gutseit's widowed mother Natasha worried that the czar might retract this release at any point. She recently lost her teenage son Russya, who had been murdered at a workers' demonstration, and wanted to protect her remaining family members from future savagery. So during Ridnyik's pregnancy with son Victor, Paley's grandmother arranged for the married pair's emergency escape to America.

When Paley's parents initially reached the United States, eager to shape a promising future for their family and develop helpful connections, they lived at various addresses in lower Manhattan. Not knowing any English, Gutseit first became fluent in Italian, which he learned from working at a photography studio. To earn additional income, Ridnyik obtained jobs retouching photographs from home while taking care of the children. By the time she and Gutseit were twenty-three, they had two young kids to support. During this time, Paley's parents decided to change their surname to the easily pronounceable “Goodside,” which also offered the advantage of sounding American. In addition, once the Goodsides established a more permanent
residence, moving to West 116th Street, Paley's grandmother and two aunts soon emigrated to America, instantly enlarging the family. From this point forward, all of the relatives lived together under one roof for many years with Isaac Goodside swiftly rising to become a powerful patriarch. Surrounded by women who idolized him while also competing for his attention on a constant basis, he embraced this authoritative role in his quest to assimilate the Goodside family into mainstream American culture. Simultaneously, Paley's father attended and then graduated from medical school, transforming himself from a Russian revolutionary to congenial family physician Dr. Goodside. This career successfully advanced the family upward on the path to attain a middle-class standard of living. During the 1918 flu epidemic, Dr. Goodside ushered the entire family to a new home in The Bronx. Due to his medical knowledge and charismatic personality, Dr. Goodside immediately prospered, becoming a trusted medical practitioner within this community. In his first year as a family doctor he made forty to fifty calls a day to households afflicted by this deadly outbreak and established a genuine standing in the neighborhood because of his expertise.

By the time Paley joined the Goodside family in 1922, her relatives had already immersed themselves in the American way of life, each striving to take advantage of the opportunities that this new world offered. Yet within the actual home, family members maintained their ethnic identities as Russian Jews, defying America's unstated expectations that immigrants discard their belief systems in favor of becoming fully absorbed by mainstream society. To complicate matters further, while the Goodsides viewed themselves as culturally Jewish, they diverged from any religious affiliations that would impose rules and an external structure on their lifestyle. Therefore, they did not attend services at any local synagogues or
practice substantial Judaic traditions according to this faith. Indeed, both of Paley's parents, especially her father, demonstrated open contempt for religion as a whole. In a 1987 interview with Martha Satz, Paley describes her father's unmistakable scorn for spiritual bureaucracy: “as far as my father was concerned, he would spit if he saw a Chassid walking down the street as well as a priest. Either one of them disgusted him utterly” (Satz 482). Whether he encountered an Orthodox Jew or a member of the Christian clergy, Dr. Goodside expressed immediate disdain for the religious doctrines each individual represented. What's more, out of the entire family residing in the United States at that time, Paley's grandmother remained the lone relative who made any effort to maintain a link to Jewish customs. Arcana explains:

The family was, as their politics might suggest, rather irreligious. Only the elder Mrs. Goodside practiced Judaism; Grace remembers that when she was a young child, on holidays she would walk her grandmother down the block a few doors to the synagogue, which was a house just like their own. She herself did not attend more than a few Sunday school classes. (Arcana 13)

For this reason, Paley lacked a formal Jewish education. In fact, she had little experience with any kind of a temple congregation, where traditional holiday celebrations, prayers, rituals, and religious events would occur, because of her parents' passionately agnostic views.

Instead of adopting an allegiance to Judaism and its strict principles, Paley's family members refused to seek belonging within their native faith or any other religion. In the same 1987 interview with Satz, Paley describes how her relatives defined themselves, explaining that formal Jewish customs held no place in the Goodside household: “Well, my family was atheist,

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4 Dr. Martha Satz is an assistant professor of English at Southern Methodist University. She mostly teaches courses in African American and Jewish American literature. Her 1987 article “Looking at Disparities: An Interview with Grace Paley” is a transcript of her conversation with this author and does not contain any analysis. Interestingly, though, it captures Paley's voice as she speaks with refreshing openness about her family life, her relationship to Judaism, and how womanhood exists as a prominent theme in her stories, among other key topics.
all of them, except my grandmother. And my father and my mother really believed in their Socialist ideals” (Satz 482). Effectively, Paley's parents substituted socialist ways of thought in place of Jewish rituals, thereby broadening their spirituality to be more inclusive. Bonnie Lyons clarifies this approach further by delineating the influence of Paley's agnostic family on the author's writings. She closely examines Paley's claims to be the product of an anti-religious ancestry that embraces a socialist mindset. Furthermore, Lyons states that this attitude, where a general appreciation and advocacy of humankind surpasses religious partitions, derives from Paley's own heritage: “In Paley's work [...] is the same commitment to one world humanity that transcends all distinctions and unites all human beings as human beings. This is the vision of the Jewish socialists early in the century in both Eastern Europe and this country” (Lyons 32). As a result of Paley's upbringing, which prioritized an all-inclusive respect for humanity over religious distinctions, she did not view herself as an observant Jew in a devotional sense.

Furthermore, the nurturing Paley received as a child exposed her to various societal perspectives that were not restricted to any specific faith, enabling this author to appreciate the principles that often connect different cultures. In an interview published years after her dialogue with Satz, Paley describes the profound influence of politics on her relatives' global views. Frequently, they discussed how assorted governments treated their respective populations, often enjoying lively talks on this subject around the table. Her relatives' vigorous political discourse stands out as an important revelation in Paley's 1994 conversation with Joann Gardner: “My family was political. It was just their way of thinking about the world. They talked about it as a

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5 Lyons's 1989 article titled “Grace Paley's Jewish Miniatures” specifically focuses on the short story writer's Judaic identity. Lyons argues that most scholarly criticism of Paley looks at her left-wing politics and feminist lens without enough in-depth acknowledgment of her identification as a Jew.
place in which society was organized sometimes for the good of the people, more often to harm them” (Gardner 19). As a young girl, Paley often listened to her relatives explore this topic at length. In fact, she thought about the ideas that her family members frequently described, gradually drawing conclusions about their ethics while overhearing these in-depth exchanges. During a 1992 episode of National Public Radio's *Fresh Air*, Paley summarizes her relatives' standpoint in an interview with Terry Gross: “Their basic politics were very deep and humane in every way” (Gross 449). The compassion at the heart of these talks served as an inspiration for Paley's body of work, providing a meaningful foundation on issues of morality. To that end, where community-wide decency becomes a prominent theme, Lyons argues: “some of her stories...seem to reflect directly her own background, including the impassioned kitchen table political discussion, but the idealism of her family's Yiddishkeit especially the faith in social justice and commitment to creating a more human[e] life, underlie all the stories” (Lyons 32). By weaving the Goodside family's political and social values into her fiction, Paley reinforces many Jewish principles, even though she never obtained any formal education in Judaic rituals.

What's more, Paley recognized her Jewishness with deep-rooted pride from a cultural context, supplying another intricate layer that maintains an essential link to her heritage. A striking example of Paley's perspective shines within her italicized introduction to the first section of *Just As I Thought* titled “Beginnings.” Paley offers crucial background information

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6 Gardner's article titled “An Interview by Joann Gardner” is a detailed question-and-answer piece. Originally published in *The American Poetry Review*, this interview provides Paley with a forum in which to share her political views and their effect on the works she has published, specifically her poetry.

7 Gross's 1992 interview with Grace Paley was published in *The Massachusetts Review* a year after the short story writer's death in 2008. The piece titled “Interview by Terry Gross” enables Paley to engage in an insightful dialogue, where she discusses a number of topics related to her work. From reflections on her social activism to comments on how her parents feared these impassioned activities to her commitment to challenging the glorification of war for her children's sake, Paley provides illuminating responses to Gross's questions.
about the brief yet complex story she calls “A Midrash on Happiness” embedded in the larger essay “Like All Other Nations.” This piece features the third-person vantage point of Faith Darwin Asbury, Paley's most famous heroine and a recurring character who appears in more than fifteen of the author's short stories. Using the midrashist tradition of examining ancient texts, Paley trades this customary focus of Judaic study for a close reading of what it means to attain a joyful outlook in the face of personal and political desolation. Deborah Heller notes: “One might, in fact, argue that the ideal of happiness does indeed allude to a canonical text” (Heller 87). Heller's observation helps to heighten Paley's insight in applying this Jewish principle to an idea that all of humanity can understand. In effect, Paley Americanizes this convention while also venerating its Judaic basis. Her respect for the Judaic origin of a midrash comes across in Paley's rationale for writing this short work when she states: “I wanted to tell how my serious atheistic Jewish parents gave me enough stories - biblical, historical - so that I grew up as a Jewish woman and liked it” (Paley 4). Although the Goodside family did not meticulously follow Jewish traditions, Paley still developed an unmistakable attachment to her Judaic heritage, which emerges throughout the complex fabric of her work.

Furthermore, while Paley's relatives chose to ignore most of the conventional practices of Judaism, they remained faithful to the Russian language, separating themselves from any cultural pressure to adopt English as their predominant means of communication. Within the Goodside home, family members mostly conversed in Russian and Yiddish to preserve their given traditions. By the same token, although all three of the Goodside children were born in New York City, Paley’s descriptions of the Goodside family evoke the Russian-Jewish heritage from which she emerged.

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8 Heller's 2003 article titled “Faith, Optimism, and the Place of the Personal: Grace Paley’s ‘Later the Same Day’ and ‘Midrash on Happiness’” examines two of the short story writer’s most noteworthy works. Heller specifically investigates how Paley weaves hope and a positive interpretation of the world into these writings.
York, Russian assumed a much higher position of importance than English. As a consequence, it became the older siblings' primary language throughout their youth, whereas Paley's childhood incorporated more of a mix of Russian and English. In a 1993 telephone interview with Victoria Aarons, Paley clarifies that her brother and sister were much more adept at speaking in Russian than her, understanding it with greater depth. Yet she then discusses how powerfully environment can affect one's knowledge of a given language. According to her, being in a certain place where the language is continually spoken provides an awareness of the vernacular that may not have existed before. She states: “But even, you know, all those languages, languages that are in your ear, if you go to the places where they're spoken all the time you suddenly realize you know them or you know the tune of the language, and that is the most important thing” (Aarons 50). This sort of spoken rhythm helps to define Paley's mastery of the multiple languages regularly relied upon in her childhood home. Furthermore, even though Russian did not represent her primary language, this powerful foundation furnished Paley with the natural ability to adapt and play with speech as an integral element of her stories' complex narratives.

Indeed, the Goodside family's bilingual background exposed Paley to the existence of diverse cultures, making her aware of and interested in achieving profound connections to other worlds. Arcana observes that this consciousness enabled Paley to establish an aptitude as well as a flexibility with language that supplied a profound basis for her fiction. Through detailed representations of speech and conversations between characters, which frequently investigate ethnic identity as well as politically charged topics, Paley's stories often focus on verbal interplay

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9 Aarons's 1993 article “‘The Tune of the Language’: An Interview with Grace Paley” is a transcript of their telephone conversation. It primarily focuses on a number of topics related to how Paley incorporates the spoken word into her short stories.
and self-discovery. Moreover, her pieces radiate from moments within a particular New York City neighborhood rather than progress through delineated plots that contain obvious action. In a 1985 interview with authors Peter Marchant, Earl Ingersoll, and Robert R. Harris, Paley discusses the organic nature of her writing and how the community where she lived serves as its inspiration. She states that while accepted literary structures regularly offer a basis for her work, Paley personalizes these configurations, adding elements from her own life to this intricate fusion. According to Paley, within the literary shape of her stories, “the language and the subject matter really come from the neighborhood and the street and my family” (Paley 614).

Consistently revolving around Paley's beloved neighborhood as her sanctuary, language and a keen attention to place are always significant components in her fiction. To be even more specific, Paley's work emphasizes vocalized communication, the impact of literal speaking, which often blurs the lines between speech and narrative within her texts. Ruth Perry notes that dialogue, the actual conversation between characters, exists as the backbone of Paley's work, not third-person descriptions that present the story from an undetermined distance. In fact, Perry claims that Paley's “writing process always began with the spoken language, with voices sounding in her ears. She often spoke those words aloud before writing them down. The rhythms of ordinary speech were her inspiration.” (Perry 190). What's more, Arcana states that this obvious flair with oral expression “is the root of Grace Paley's fictional ‘voices’ – the voices of her family, taught and inspired by sources beyond their conscious knowledge, speaking in

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10 In their 1985 article “A Conversation with Grace Paley,” the three authors, alongside Paley herself, discuss her writing in detail. This conversation in transcript-form focuses on her writing direction, her relationship with her father and womanhood.

11 Perry's 2009 article titled “The Morality of Orality: Grace Paley's Stories” looks closely at the author's wonderful ability to capture speech and centralize it in her works.
tongues even as they spoke American English” (Arcana 10). Therefore, Paley's proficiency with language, a skill learned through her exposure to other vernaculars, principally from her family as well as growing up in America, translated to a sensitivity to voice that empowered her to represent an abundance of cultural diversity in her collection of stories.

Although Paley's fiction illustrates her love of divergent cultures and a zeal for depicting individualized voices, she grew up in an extended family with unresolvable divisions derived from evident fractures at home. Unlike Paley's stories, which, as an overall body of work, celebrate diverse ways of thought, the Goodside clan did not show such acceptance for different views, particularly on a more personal level among the adult women. This reality caused apparent rifts within the household, which Paley witnessed on a regular basis in her youth. Significant tensions existed that routinely amounted to Paley's mother poised at one end of the spectrum with her grandmother and aunts situated on the other. In Paley's interview with Satz, she describes the ongoing strain that she observed between her relatives while coming of age in the family home, where numerous strong opinions regularly conflicted with each other:

They really had a hard time because they hadn't liked each other particularly when they were all young, and it didn't improve. And on the other hand, they all loved us, my sister and brother and me. So we really got all the good of all these people. And I was able to listen to all the differences. And I was able, amazingly, to love both sides. I tried to present each side to the other. People do it between parents, but for me it was not between my parents. (Satz 480)

Despite the difficulties of these constant disputes among the adult family members, Paley recognized the warm-heartedness in each of her relatives and appreciated all of the love they provided to the Goodside children. Not adopting one side over the other, she kept her mind open to each position, even attempting to help her relatives understand each other's outlooks. This capacity to hear as well as to respect various standpoints, which Paley frequently demonstrated
with her empathic ability, is a quality that she consistently weaves into her writing. A poignant example of Paley's empathetic insight exists within the “Introduction” of her book *Just As I Thought*. To provide a contextual history of her life, Paley offers an open and straightforward portrait of her family with its complex tensions, where certain hostilities were clear to her as a child. In this case, she represents her mother's daily challenges with strong-willed in-laws who constantly competed for her husband's affections:

In my middle-class childhood she managed a household – my father's neighborhood medical practice on the first floor and the complicated family life upstairs. She was not liked by my grandmother or my aunt. She lived with them all her life. She died before they did. I could see they felt my mother's love for my father one-upped their love for him - at least it interfered with their serving him his evening tea or morning coffee. (Paley XV)

Sympathy for her mother's predicament shines through Paley's forthright account of this antagonism in the household. Indeed, Paley applies this same unadorned tone when depicting the trials of her characters, frequently deriving from her own family experiences.

While Paley's gift of compassionate sensitivity toward her loved ones helped address the evolving discord within this household, she also caused significant separations among the Goodside relatives herself. Once she became a teenager, Paley started to act differently and the problems that materialized were a shock to her family members. Throughout her youth, these relatives had always viewed her as a studious child who conveyed an eagerness to please everyone. In fact, as a young girl, Paley loved to read, immersed herself in writing poetry, and earned high grades at school. Because of her talents, the Goodsides assumed that Paley would flourish upon reaching high school and beyond, succeeding in whatever direction she chose to pursue. Yet Paley also received mixed messages about her potential and the available opportunities before her due to gender alone. During her interview with Satz, Paley describes the
conflicting communications that she received from her family about their vision for her future.

She discusses how the encouragement to pursue various career paths collided with the pressure to follow a more traditional path designated for American womanhood:

Oh, their expectations of me were that I should do whatever I wanted to do. I think one of the interesting things is the way there was this method called double-think. The expectation is that you can do anything, you're a smart kid, you read a lot. You'll be an honor to the family. You'll go to school. You'll get “A's.” You are already getting “A's” in fourth grade. You are going to do marvelous, you'll be brilliant, you can be anything you want to be. Of course, they think...what do they think of? You can be a teacher, a social worker, but you can be a doctor. But at the same time, you get this other thing, that if you don't get married pretty quick, if you put it off too long, you'll end up like this aunt or this cousin. And you'll lead no kind of serious life. So you get both of these things all the time.

(Satz 481)

Paley's picture of the family's reaction to her indicates a number of notable details. Based on her account, the Goodside family applied generalizations to Paley while she grew up in a household full of continual drama among the adults. Indeed, Paley's characterization suggests a certain degree of simplification, where her high scores in fourth grade were used to justify generic presumptions for her future. Furthermore, despite Paley's many talents, she deduced that her gender eclipsed these various options in favor of a more conventional path. Ultimately, her relatives insisted that she prioritize marriage over other possibilities, superseding their prior encouragement that Paley could “be anything.” However, this clash between a career developed from Paley's evident skills and an established, standard life geared for women of that era receded somewhat as a more urgent issue surfaced. When Paley matured into adolescence, she largely abandoned her scholastic interests beyond continuing to write poetry. Instead of her former focus on schoolwork, Paley engaged in volatile battles with her parents as she rebelled against their expectations and asserted her independence from them.
Inside the Goodside household, Paley mostly fought with her mother to assert more power and to define freedom for herself on her own terms, instigating further divisions at home. But other family members, including her father and siblings, were also drawn into these emotional altercations. Passionately attracted to boys and much less compliant than her older brother and sister, Paley asserted her individuality with a vengeance. In fact, Paley's older sister Jeanne Tenenbaum recalls to Arcana that their parents were bewildered by the youngest Goodside in the family: “‘Gracie gave them trouble...because she was so different than me...They didn't know what to think of her. But she went along in her own way. Nothing stopped her’” (Arcana 33). To be sure, Paley exhibited an unprecedented wildness in the household that the Goodsides viewed as unfathomable, a development that they never predicted would occur. Paley's perplexing behavior included how often she socialized with boys, the chaotic messiness of her room, her political activism (which drastically differed from her parents' American patriotism) and her overall secrecy about various interactions outside of the home. According to Arcana, Paley's family members were overwhelmed by the teenager's mystifying behavior and did not know how to approach the situation effectively. Arcana provides a broader context that explains why all of the adults in Paley's family were so baffled by her conduct: “A young poet who was often in love but rarely in school, a blooming anarchist and a confirmed romantic, Grace was a constant frustration to her surprised and anxious parents” (Arcana 27). When Paley developed an intense attraction to the boys around her, she could not concentrate on schoolwork or other tasks that were expected of her any longer. This behavior set her on a path that dramatically separated her from family members who regarded the circumstances with great consternation.
But as her relatives wrestled with the troubling changes they witnessed in Paley's attitude, the young author privately endured her own struggle with alienation that she felt unable to express. When describing this anguished period to Arcana, Paley theorizes that her unruliness derived from feelings of insecurity, even worries that she lacked the intelligence to succeed, during her high school years. While in the lower grades at school, she understood the material with little effort and mastered it quite easily. However, high school offered an entirely different experience, challenging her in ways that affected her self-confidence and inspired great vulnerability. She explains: “the minute that I had to do work, I got into trouble...[because] I thought if I had to do any work [that meant] I was stupid. I never had to do anything before” (Arcana 31). Paley did not share this distorted view of her capability with anyone and simply suffered through these internal conflicts alone while acting in a disobedient manner at home. Furthermore, as her high school education progressed, Paley's academic focus deteriorated even while she continued to write poems with passionate dedication. Paley admitted to Arcana that other than her devotion to poetry, she refused to concentrate any energy on schoolwork, virtually avoiding this responsibility altogether. “I began to go downhill. And I speedily went downhill...I really did poorly in most subjects. I studied very little and I was very lazy. I thought about boys constantly and I was mostly in love” (Arcana 31). Because of Paley's scholastic disinterest, amounting to a decision to disengage from school, she viewed herself as intellectually incapable. These inaccurate negative conclusions created a debilitating spiral effect that deepened Paley's depression.

In the midst of her inner conflict, expressed through a combination of rebellion and lowered self-esteem, Paley's mother received a traumatic diagnosis that only deepened the
family's already established fractures. At the age of thirteen, Paley found out that her mother had breast cancer. However, she discovered this terrible truth indirectly, not through family members explaining her mother's progressive illness in any detail. Instead, Paley overheard hushed discussions of her mother's grim prognosis when no one realized her nearby presence. In a 1975 essay titled “Other Mothers,” which Paley includes within her semi-autobiography Just As I Thought, she describes the moment of this devastating awareness:

One evening I hear the people in the dining room say that the mother is going to die. I remain in the coat closet, listening. She is not going to die soon, I learn. But it will happen. One of the men at the table says that I must be told. I must not be spoiled. Others disagree. They say I have to go to school and do my homework. I have to play. Besides, it will be several years. (Paley 42)

Because of the collective decision by relatives to hide her mother's serious condition, Paley obeyed this arrangement, unbeknownst to them, and pretended to be unaware of the distressing truth. Perhaps the shock of overhearing these discussions can explain Paley's emotional disconnection, where her own portrayal of this memory contains such a detached feel. Rather than showing any substantial attachment to this primary maternal figure, Paley characterizes Manya Goodside as “the mother” in her piece. That aloof attitude, edged with a quiet disbelief, accurately reflects Paley's childhood response. In reality, she did distance herself from an important and treasured relationship because of the complexities of this unspoken, impending upheaval fused with her determined quest for independence. Years later, however, Paley's mindset about her mother's influence evolved to a profound degree, giving her the capacity to appreciate the cautious guidance and personal suffering Goodside embodied. As Paley began to explore issues of womanhood and the challenges associated with mothering in her fiction, Manya Goodside's presence emerges as an intricate thread woven throughout many of the author's most
significant stories. While this family strife unfolded, though, when Paley naturally lacked the context to contemplate these circumstances with any thoughtful cognizance, her disengagement expanded further within the household. This outcome occurred, in part, because she never questioned or confronted family members on the traumatic knowledge about her mother's health problems. In addition, Paley avoided any straightforward conversation with Goodside on the topic while also understanding on some level, despite her inner denials, the inevitable loss to come.

To complicate these difficult dynamics, Manya Goodside's condition developed just as Paley focused intense adolescent hostility almost exclusively on her, further widening the emotional divide between mother and daughter. Paley's extensive resentment generated more barriers for the two to navigate. Unfortunately, neither Paley nor her mother ever reached a constructive resolution to improve the strain that continued to escalate. While recalling this time to Arcana, Paley confirms that she remained insulated from any recognition of her mother's ailment. What's more, she validates the uncompromising attitude that she exhibited during this difficult era of her life. Paley openly describes her juvenile mindset and the lack of sympathy that she felt for Goodside: “‘Her illness didn't change anything for me [...] Being in love with a boy changed everything for me more than my mother's illness’” (Arcana 28). In Arcana's estimation, Paley's characterization of her indifference indicates the author's immature reaction during these teenage years. Furthermore, Arcana explains that the emotional nourishment Paley's extended family supplied could account for such a restrained response to Goodside's suffering since she always received plenty of attention. Because Paley grew up within a household much larger than the customary nuclear family, she enjoyed close maternal connections with other
mother figures at home. This key aspect of her childhood compensated for Goodside's absences during various hospitalizations over the course of her sickness. During Paley's conversation with Arcana on this topic, she corroborates the theory that since other adults expressed devoted care for her, she did not feel deprived by inavailability. Paley states: “‘You know, there were other people around all the time, my aunt, my grandmother, my sister, my father; I was very dear to my father’” (Arcana 28). Since Paley experienced this automatic access to numerous adults, each showing her great care, she did not struggle with Goodside's gradual weakening. Perhaps her mother's slow withdrawal from full activity within the house, where she had once provided a quietly powerful disciplinarian presence, offered some relief to Paley. Fewer hindrances prevented her from conducting herself as she wished and encouraged greater boldness as well.

Throughout these years, Paley's relatives were alarmed at her demands for autonomy, where the young poet routinely separated from relatives to engage in practices that inspired a substantial amount of distress. Paley recognizes this truth to Arcana as she remembers her rebellious reactions to family members' angst: “‘whatever I wanted to do, I would do. I was very headstrong. No matter what they would say – if they would say, Oh, you're killing Mama, I would do it anyway’” (Arcana 28). Though Paley candidly characterizes her teenaged behavior, Arcana views this difficult period in a divergent light. She calls the blame cast on Paley for worsening Goodside's illness “false as well as cruel” (Arcana 29). The progression of Manya Goodside's cancer occurred due to a dreadful disease that no one had the power to alleviate. Therefore, Arcana expresses that Paley should never have been condemned for the suffering that Goodside withstood. Based on this biographer's representation of the saddening circumstances, Paley experienced a number of complex events that justified her feelings of estrangement,
emotions that the teenager did not fully comprehend herself. Yet Arcana also describes Paley's contributions to this heightened tension within the family. She explains how Paley often evaded attempts at any discipline in order to socialize until the late-night hours while also regularly ignoring her homework. Because of this strong objection to authority, Paley acted in a manner that her relations felt helpless to control or to manage, only aggravating more widespread friction. Adding yet another layer to this ongoing strain, Manya Goodside witnessed many of Paley's concerning behaviors while resting at home in between her hospital visits. According to other family members whom Arcana interviewed, Paley's wildness worried Goodside and caused her to feel significant anxiety over her daughter's future.

During a near ten-year period, Paley watched her mother advance in this deadly disease while she herself matured into young adulthood, struggling to find fulfillment and emotional connectedness. Between 1935, when Manya Goodside first detected a small lump on her breast, until 1944, the year she succumbed to the cancer, Paley encountered multiple life changes that shaped her future outlook. These challenges provided her with profound insights on the complexities of womanhood while also helping Paley eventually view her mother in a much more appreciative light. Yet the path to this ultimate awareness, later memorialized within the complex texture of Paley's stories, took the writer on an emotionally difficult journey that often inspired immense desolation. From dropping out of high school at almost the age of sixteen, which caused deep shame, to spending a single year at New York University before abandoning college, Paley sensed the family’s doubts about her intelligence at this time. She even informed Arcana that relatives considered her to be “‘a dud’” (Arcana 39). This unspoken disappointment, which Paley internalized, ultimately evolved in her short fiction, weaving through numerous
stories about everyday womanhood. Ironically, even though she did not enjoy taking classes, Paley taught writing at various universities around New York City, where she devoted herself to instructing others on her art. For twenty-two years, beginning in 1966, Paley offered classes at Sarah Lawrence College. Furthermore, she helped create the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in New York during the late 1960s as well. These educational roles disproved her family's previous assumptions about Paley's academic weaknesses.

Long before Paley's role as a writing instructor and prior to transforming her silent anguish into literature, however, she took a different step to alleviate her ongoing depression and mend emotional fractures. Through the development of her first serious relationship, one that she never anticipated and blossomed with great speed, Paley moved beyond this sadness and opened herself to the world around her again. In late 1939 or 1940, she accidentally met Jess Paley when he knocked at the Goodside's front door with some of his friends, hoping to experience a musical evening. Dr. Goodside frequently hosted classical music gatherings that attracted local residents, including teenagers, from the neighborhood. On this particular night, no party had been planned by Dr. Goodside, but the misunderstanding set a romance in motion that altered Paley's entire life. Although Grace Goodside lacked any prior acquaintance with Jess Paley, their attraction to each other occurred immediately. Two years before Manya Goodside's death, Paley married her boyfriend, bringing her tumultuous behavior to a prompt close. At the age of nineteen, Grace Goodside Paley embarked on a journey of self-discovery, where she traveled the world and began the process of shaping her own home.

At this pivotal stage of her life, as she adjusted to becoming a responsible adult, Paley also navigated feelings of alienation from family, sensing relatives' disappointment in her
scholastic defeats. Most of her relations had reconciled with Paley's apparent inability to achieve the same academic heights as her college-educated older siblings and assumed she would only become a mother in the end, nothing more. However, this resignation, amounting to a general dismissal of Paley's capacities, did not fully resonate with Manya Goodside's perspective on the matter. Instead, she viewed Paley's marriage with a hopeful solace that helped ease her worries, confident that this union would soften the young woman's stubbornness while also providing welcome security and safety. Yet both of these contrasting viewpoints from various relatives about Paley's decision to marry at such a young age, situated at opposite ends of the spectrum, contained their own deficiencies, which Arcana identifies. Not only did family members underestimate Paley and her talents at this time, their presumptions failed to acknowledge the potential volatility ahead for her. According to Paley's biographer, relatives' range of strong opinions about this marriage were not comparable to what the future author would actually encounter on her journey:

The belief that Grace would be taken care of by her husband led to Manya Goodside's acceptance of her daughter's leaving school and marrying -- an attitude that was shared by Isaac, their daughter speculates. Though her "wildness" -- both political and social -- was indeed modified by the marriage and ensuing motherhood, the Goodsides' relief is ironic in view of Grace's husband's World War II duty in the South Pacific and the young couple's financial difficulties throughout the decade following the war. (Arcana 40)

A number of complex factors entwined to complicate the spouses' smooth progression into married life and economic stability. Soon after their marriage, a whirlwind ensued with Jess's life that fully immersed his wife's world as well. He earned a Physics degree at City College, traveled to the South Pacific for active duty, and returned to New York as a depressed veteran who lacked a professional direction. As a result, the early years of Grace Paley's marriage were
tumultuous and full of intense uncertainty. In addition, While the Goodside family reacted to the union with a blend of misgivings, relief, and some sadness, the Paley clan felt only a keen resentment at the couple's decision to wed. Indeed, both of Jess Paley's parents, his powerfully orthodox grandmother, and his extended family were united against this marriage.

Beyond any personal grievances, however, the Paley family's objections to Grace Goodside revolved around the same social hierarchies, economic divisions, and repressive cultural alienation that both Anzia Yezierska and Dorothy Parker each experienced for varying reasons. The distinct prejudices that had been projected onto Eastern European Jews by German Jews in America since the end of the nineteenth century influenced how the Paleys viewed their son's new wife and her family. Even as Judaism hovered on the fringes of American society and despite New York City's diverse landscape, clear social partitions within this faith separated German Jews from their Eastern European counterparts, solidifying intense frictions. This long-time trend, established by the massive immigration of Eastern European Jews in America at the turn of the century, represented a complex texture that set these Judaic subgroups against each other. In light of the Paley family's immediate rejection of Grace Goodside, Gerald Sorin offers an explanation that historicizes the innate biases within American Judaism based solely on a desire for cultural acceptance. Sorin illuminates why German Jews, who had successfully integrated within America's dominant culture since colonial times, regarded more recent Jewish immigrants, arriving from the late 1800s until the early 1900s, with such bitterness. German-American Jews believed they triumphantly blended into this new world, assimilating with seamless skill to avert American prejudice. But the influx of Russian-Jewish immigrants
threatened this stability in the view of German Jews and placed their own cultural standing as well as their safety at risk:

Though there were very few visible reminders of their peddler origins, the German Jews in the 1880s were apparently too insecure to feel comfortable with the poverty, the Yiddish, the Orthodoxy, and the socialism of the new arrivals from Eastern Europe [...] The objective members of the more established American Jewish community admitted that the arrival of the new breed of Jews from Eastern Europe did not cause anti-Semitism; nevertheless, many believed, not without reason, that the immigrant presence promised only to intensify it. (Sorin 35-36)

Therefore, the immense fear that Eastern-European Jewish immigrants would inspire an onrush of devastating bigotry caused fully Americanized Jews to create clear separations from newcomers. Jews of German descent developed different strategies to maintain evident distance from Judaic foreigners entering American society. For this reason, German Jews frequently scorned the idea of social equality with those of Russian and Polish ancestry, a cultural trend that wove with undeniable prominence into Grace Paley's marital experience as well.

Notable differences between the Goodsides and the Paleys were remarkably distributed along the cultural boundaries that segregated each side of this Judaic scope. While the Goodside family chose to live in the Bronx, surrounded by other Jewish households and immersed in their Russian culture, the Paleys selected a brownstone in Manhattan, where they resided amongst Christians. Just as the Paley family enjoyed financial comfort, however, the Goodsides had also reached economic security. In fact, by the time Paley married, her parents could have afforded to live in a more upscale neighborhood than the Bronx, choosing a unique home with its own floor plan instead of a two-story brick house identical to the adjacent homes on their street. Unlike the

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12 Sorin's 1993 article “Mutual Contempt, Mutual Benefit: The Strained Encounter Between German and Eastern European Jews in America, 1880-1920” provides a comprehensive history of the tension existing between these Jewish cultures in their adjustment to American life.
Paley clan, the Goodsides preferred to be in a community where other Jews also dwelled. Paley points out this significant distinction between the two families in her conversations with Arcana, where she recounts the different values that distinguished one clan from the other. Through describing the cultural atmosphere that she treasured in her neighborhood, Paley states how she “was always surrounded by Jews; very comfortable among Jews, I was” (Arcana 41). Indeed, this sense of well-being developed from her and her family's immersion in the Jewish culture, living alongside others who shared their cultural identity, where religious denominations were blurred without any genuine consideration.

The sharp contrasts between the Goodside and the Paley families not only reveal striking borders between diverse Jewish identities, but they define much of the short story author's own sentiment about how social responsibility can help overcome cultural alienation. This crucial facet entwines throughout Paley's work as an everlasting theme. It represents the power of meaningful attachments that transcend blood relations to embrace a shared mindset. Paley evolved from a child into an aware woman within the context of an accepting community of multiple Jewish families, all situated around the Goodside's detached, single-family home. Over numerous years, neighboring households were transformed into extended relations. During this era, warm feelings of connection developed that celebrated deep-rooted togetherness. Paley routinely captures this affection and shared affinity within the complex texture of her fiction. Because she passionately believed in the merits of community, where mutual care expanded beyond blood ties alone, many of her stories centralize the Jewish neighborhood as a sanctuary. In piece after piece, she portrays this expanse as an all-embracing safe haven to shield those residing within its boundaries from the larger, more heartless world. Through her fiction as well
as her social activism, Paley elevates the community's ability to bring cohesiveness to
marginalized societies, thereby surpassing the nation's mainstream indifference to those that exist
beyond a fully Americanized way of life.

As Paley matured through the early years of womanhood, eventually creating her own
domestic space in Greenwich Village, she confronted a number of painful and isolating
circumstances. While grievous, these situations supplied important subject matter that Paley
thoughtfully wove into her future works about Jewish women's lived experience and their often
desolate, unspoken struggles. From the painful loss of her mother to the difficult decision to have
an abortion after recently bearing two children to navigating a marriage that provided little
emotional sustenance, Paley coped with several difficult situations during this time, which an
attentive network of neighborhood women always helped her to withstand. Furthermore, an
essential and quite profound development blossomed from the series of traumas over this period
of a little more than a decade, substantially enabling the launch of Paley's career as an author.
Arcana speculates that Paley's recovery from her abortion offered her the subsequent ability to
focus, to gather the creative strength for her to write without distractions:

Grace knows she began to write stories late in 1952. Her abortion was near the
end of that year and, in a sharply ironic turn, probably was the circumstance that
afforded her the time to write fiction. We often use metaphors of motherhood and
birth when we speak of writing, or any kind of creative work. Women realize that
we must make choices about time for children, time for work – balancing and
juggling, arranging lives to include what can be done, to produce what can be
given. Writers – often men or childless women – may even speak of manuscripts
as their children. If that abortion was indeed the source of her first story-writing
time – time without noise, interruption, and the consuming needs of children, time
for creations of the spirit and mind instead of the body – it becomes a singular
representation of the forbearance and irony entailed in the “choices” of women
artists. (Arcana 83)

According to Arcana's theory, Paley's efforts to write directly align with the automatic freedom
afforded to her while recuperating from a recent abortion. Indeed, Arcana implies that without
the requirement for rest, Paley may not have had the luxury of time to weave her short stories
together. Given the chance to focus, where she could explore her love of writing as she healed,
Paley took advantage of this reprieve from racing after two young children, part-time work to
supplement her husband's sporadic income, and the organization of the family's household,
which lay largely on her shoulders alone. The inherent pressure of nonstop domestic and
financial responsibilities, previously absorbing every moment prior to her procedure, eased out
of necessity so she could finally write. As a result, Grace Paley combined the unspoken
experiences of Jewish womanhood and an acute awareness of community together in meaningful
fashion, generating conversation-oriented fiction without any literary equivalent. Because of this
purposeful fusion, Paley emerged as an author who offers an important voice, where Judaism,
feminism, and socialist principles unify into a complex, most nourishing texture to celebrate the
ordinary lives of women.

The notion that Paley's artistry only materialized because of health-related circumstances
is supported within the author's own reflections, where she discusses the benefits of this isolation
from the normal demands of her life. While Paley does not go into any details, she admits to
Arcana's timeline in the introduction to her 1992 book titled The Collected Stories, alluding to
this medical situation. On the very first page, she states that two fortuitous events occurred,
which Paley labels as “lucks” (Paley ix), an ironic label given the procedure she endured. First,
Paley explains she faced an ailment that justified keeping her children in an after school program
until suppertime for a number of weeks. Then Paley qualifies this observation by pointing out
she did not become incapacitated enough that she lacked the stamina to sit at her family's living-
room table “to write or type all day” (Paley ix). Such an admission suggests feelings of guilt for using this unexpected block of time for anything other than caretaking duties. Indeed, she avoids any attempt to legitimize the rest that her body needed or to offer a defense for this temporary withdrawal from the full extent of her regular household responsibilities. Instead, Paley offers an indirect apology of sorts to admit that she could assemble enough energy to write at this time in her life. This self-effacement might be a reflection of how Paley believed readers might react to a young woman's decision to put writing ahead of her role as an active mother.

However, Paley's abortion offers much greater complexity than she divulges in this short introduction, where she deliberately avoids any discussion of her actual feelings and the ongoing disconnection from her husband. But she does explain the circumstances more clearly in a separate essay titled “The Illegal Days,” included within her semi-autobiography *Just As I Thought*. In this piece, she looks closely at the perceptions involved in her decision, providing a thoughtful context for her ultimate choice to undergo the procedure. Quite notably, Paley speaks of turning to her neighborhood friends for their advice without ever mentioning any discussions with Jess: “I talked the situation over with the women in the park where I used to hang out with the kids. None of them thought having an abortion was a terrible thing to do” (Paley 15). Indirectly, Paley demonstrates the emotional intimacy she enjoyed with her women friends, who offered moral support and reinforced her own opinions on the matter, always allowing her to confide deeply personal information to them. In contrast, the author also illustrates the distance between herself and Jess Paley. Over the course of this essay, Paley does not disclose any interaction with him, not a single conversation. Instead, she only explains his perspective in a remote tone as if she herself wants to understand the situation more clearly: “And my husband
and I were having hard times. It was really rough. My husband was not that crazy about having children anyway; it was low on his list of priorities” (Paley 14). In addition to this admission that he did not view a family as one of his prime concerns, Paley describes his preoccupation with figuring out a future for himself after returning from the army. She states how he eventually became a documentary filmmaker, illustrating the separate mindsets and considerations of each spouse. His career choice to produce films ultimately took him all over the world, leaving Paley to handle domestic duties by herself during these long absences. Therefore, Paley's emotional reliance on her women friends contains even more meaning, though she does not delve into this reality here. But her account of the actual abortion avoids any expression of blame or resentment, evading sentiment altogether merely to provide an observation of this episode in her life:

I didn't feel bad about the abortion. I didn't have the feelings that people are always describing. I may have hidden some of the feelings but having had a child at that time would have been so much worse for me. I was certainly scared, and it's not something you want necessarily to do, but I don't see it in that whole ethical or moral framework. I guess I really didn't think of the fetus as a child until it was really a child. (Paley 16)

Despite the controversial nature of this topic, Paley writes about the experience with a striking dispassion. Her words feel clinical in their lack of emotion, even with her admission of fear at the prospect of enduring this procedure. Perhaps her upbringing, which frequently contained impersonal discussions of social issues over private emotions, contributed to the aloof attitude that registers through her description of this trauma.

The disconnected nature of Paley's narrative reveals a poignant sense of isolation and sadness despite the strength that she projects at the same time. Though Paley relates her experience with a stoic tone, mostly focusing on the practical nature of her eventual determination to justify this choice, an apparent disconnect remains. Furthermore, based on
separate interviews, Arcana disagrees with the author's detached account of her decision to terminate the pregnancy. Rather, Arcana points out her suspicion that Paley suppressed her true anguish. She makes this claim in reference to a remark Paley shared with her, where the author admits her desire to keep the baby after listing myriad reasons for getting an abortion. Arcana states:

Much of what she says about this abortion is contradictory – as is commonly the case in women's lives, even when decisions are solidly made. Jess didn't want more children; she loved spending time with the two babies she already had; their income was uncertain at best; she was a writer who already had no time to write; “And yet I would have wanted it.” (Arcana 58)

Arcana's analysis humanizes Paley, showing the author's genuine pain with thoughtful insights on the true nature of this inner conflict. In addition, she suggests that Paley suffered the same kind of angst that many women who must make such a distressing decision encounter. The grief that Paley felt exists in the unspoken, much like the way she portrays her women characters, where they silently hurt without ever calling direct attention to their actual emotions.

Consistent with the modesty that this author demonstrates in every straightforward account of her life, where she refrains from proclaiming the depth of her feelings, Paley also employs this approach to describe her triumphs. As she continues to describe the context for her writing career in the introduction to her The Collected Stories, Paley follows her first “luck,” which refers to her unstated illness, as an important connection that she formed through one of her neighbors. She describes how the former husband of a close friend, who happened to be an editor at Doubleday, offered to publish Paley's first book of stories. After relating this exciting moment, Paley concludes: “Well, that was luck, wasn't it? I don't say this to minimize the stories. I worked conscientiously to write them as truthfully and as beautifully as I could; but so do
others, yet they are not usually visited with contracts” (Paley x). Due to Paley's humility, she minimizes the fact that Ken McCormick recognized a special quality in her work, evidently motivating him to encourage the author to write more stories for publication. While she never delineates the exact reasons behind McCormick's eager interest, Paley does reveal more about this pivotal and career-defining interaction during her interview with *The Paris Review*:

I’d written three stories, and I liked them. I showed them to my former husband, Jess Paley, and he liked them, and he showed them to a couple of friends, and *they* liked them, so I was feeling pretty good about them. The kids were still young at the time, and they played a lot with the neighborhood kids, so I got to know the other mothers in the neighborhood. One of them was Tibby McCormick, who had just gotten unmarried from Ken McCormick, an editor at Doubleday. She knew about these stories, and poor Ken was more or less forced into reading them—you know, The kids are over at her house all the time, you *might* read her stories. So he took them home and read them and he came over to see me and said, Write seven more of them and we’ll publish a book. So that’s what happened. Luck happened. He also told me that no magazine around would touch them, and he was pretty much right about that too, although two of the stories in that collection were finally taken by *Accent*. (Dee, Jones, and MacFarquhar 1992)\(^\text{13}\)

In this modest synopsis of her entrance onto the literary scene at the end of the 1950s, Paley supplies a number of crucial details that provide an informative context for McCormick's meaningful overture.

Beyond this casual, even modest, summary that divulges the exact circumstances of Paley's rise to prominence as a short story writer, her explanation demonstrates how warm connections with other neighborhood women led to the author's ultimate success. Quite possibly,

\(^{13}\) In the 1992 article titled “Grace Paley, The Art of Fiction No. 131,” Jonathan Dee, Barbara Jones, and Larissa MacFarquhar interviewed Paley on the street outside her apartment in the West Village. By this time, she was living in Vermont with her second husband Robert Nichols. But she came home to New York City for a Passover celebration with friends at the time of this conversation. The topics in this discussion, which offer a lively dialogue, range from how Paley began her literary career to the inspiration for her stories to the common criticism that her works lack any perceptible plot.
these intimate attachments may also have been consequential factors in Paley's ability to overcome feelings of inadequacy during her teenage years. Indeed, the friendships that Paley developed enhanced her life, fundamentally propelling her to literary acclaim as well as helping her to blossom from an emotional vantage point. Moreover, the sustenance that she received from her women friends contained a devoted mutuality, too. Ruth Perry offers a vital detail that beautifully encapsulates Paley's dedication to the people whom she embraced: “At home, her phone was constantly ringing” (Perry 195). Deepening this observation further, Perry states that Paley always made herself accessible to others to a remarkable degree. Tibby McCormick's persistent advocacy for Paley illustrates a caring reciprocity in the author's friendships. This particular relationship in Paley's life fostered the development of a significant contact in the publishing world, which eventually led to the publication of Paley's first collection of short stories titled *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959). Through the snapshot Paley offers of her path to becoming a published writer, Paley reveals that she had established multiple relationships of similar affection with other women who shared lives much like her own in Greenwich Village. Directly because of these nourishing alliances, Paley discovered a valuable support network to help her through the challenges of an often emotionally distant marriage, financial concerns, and the hectic demands of motherhood.

Yet those benefits, while quite advantageous on a personal level, were also a treasure trove of story material as a basis for Paley's fiction, where she could explore the actual dynamics at play in lives so often overlooked by American society. What's more, many of the enriching attachments that Paley nurtured over numerous years of faithful friendship offered essential stories of Jewish womanhood that the author felt compelled to highlight so as to memorialize
their experiences. Yet that dedication to telling women's stories, ensuring that these often disregarded perspectives are heard, does not encapsulate Paley's work alone. Another profound layer exists within Paley's work, which defines her approach to writing about issues that underlie her deep concern for all humankind. Frequently through her women-oriented friendships, Paley protested against injustice, rising to become a feminist force in politics without ever putting herself at the center, content to contribute as part of a committed team of women ready to instigate cultural change. Alexandra Schwartz condenses the inspired complexities of Paley's accomplishments both as a ground-breaking short story writer and as a fierce voice for an earnest transfiguration of societal structure, particularly its needless violence. Schwartz states: “There's a case to be made that Grace Paley was first and foremost an antinuclear, antiwar, antiracist feminist activist who managed, in her spare time, to become one of the truly original voices of American fiction in the later twentieth century” (Schwartz 2017).14 Indeed, this assessment of Paley's unique combination of writing and activism, where both skills come together to produce such a considerable impact, cannot be overstated. Although Paley offers a small collection of short stories, its heart, infused with an empathic care for society often through the eyes of women, simply glows with a zeal to protect human life. This genuine, quite ardent quality gives her work an even broader essence of public-spirited sympathy that must be acknowledged. Annelise Orleck expresses the core of this remarkable reality, fundamentally representing Paley with exceptional beauty. She claims that this author “was and is the embodiment of the Eishet

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14 Schwartz's 2017 article “The Art and Activism of Grace Paley” is a book review that looks at a new collection of Paley's work with a special connection to her family. Paley's daughter Nora collaborated with editor Kevin Bowen to put together this anthology of stories, essays, and poems. In this article, Schwartz outlines Paley's extensive political life, where she actively protested against numerous causes, beginning in the 1960s and just months before her death.
Chayil, the Biblical phrase that describes a Jewish woman of valor” (Orleck 2008). Indeed, Paley did epitomize this determined, warrior-like focus, always with the goal of embracing humanity in all its wondrous diversity, not demolishing it, especially for those with a marginalized status who are helpless to raise their own voices as a protective shield against barbarity.

Because of her parents' extensive socialist concerns about the inevitable divisions caused by various governments' mistreatment of the most vulnerable, Paley developed an avid interest in activist causes. As the Goodsides settled into a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, however, they were less willing to criticize potential cultural abuses around them. Their attitude transitioned to a more gracious state of mind because of the safety and well-being they had achieved in the New World. Meanwhile, their daughter's recognition of the wrongs she perceived beyond her home were progressively heightened over time. Arcana observes that since Paley did not grow up in the same dangerous circumstances as her parents, who suffered through political horrors that they never fully articulated, she lacked the ability to appreciate the measurable differences that America offered. Therefore, Paley openly vocalized her discontent with certain American policies, moving much farther to the left side of the spectrum than her more conservative family:

Grace Goodside's parents whose political theory did not translate into overt action in this country, may have felt vaguely guilty in the face of her behavior, but at the same time they were outraged. Though they never moved far to the right, they did gratefully accept the U.S. government, finding in this nation answers and solutions to the questions and problems they had faced in the old country. (Arcana 34)

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15 Orleck's profile of Paley on the Jewish Women's Archive offers a poignant and very personal view of this author's impact, principally as a fighter for societal revision to stop any government's immediate reliance on brutality over a respect for human life. Furthermore, Orleck not only offers a good synopsis of Paley's social activism over numerous decades, but she also speaks of the writer from a notable experience. Paley had once come to speak at Orleck's U.S. women's history class. One student asked Paley if she understood the frustration that so often leads to the use of guns and bombs. Paley replied, “Sure I understand their frustration [...] but violence is just laziness. Making change takes a long time. You have to be patient. You have to do the work it takes to make change.”
Although Paley's parents would not always agree with their daughter's liberal ideas, they supplied this future author with the necessary tools to be aware of injustices around her. Ethan Goffman characterizes Paley's development as an effective protester in this fitting framework of consciousness: “Grace Paley is steeped in traditions of community, social activism, and the struggle for transformation” (Goffman 197). Indeed, Paley became cognizant of political concerns due to her parents' continued discussions of this multi-faceted topic and its many troubling effects, which she routinely overheard through lively conversations in the family's kitchen. As a result, Paley urged for a peaceful revolution, encouraging society to rethink its approaches on a number of fronts related to social justice. Yet despite passionate disagreements with her parents on political subject matter as she matured, Paley's evolution into a genuine activist did not occur until she joined the Parent Teacher Association years later. Echoing this key moment, Anita Norich writes that Paley's activism blossomed “as an extension of PTA activities in her children's school. The combination of neighborhood and, increasingly, global concerns led her to a prominent role in the peace movement of the 1960s” (Norich 2021).

Beginning as a fierce advocate for her kids, Paley broadened her passions to the surrounding community's needs. Blanche Gelfant frames the author's development in pacifist causes and illustrates how Paley promoted humane methods of interaction over cruelty for the sake of dominance. Describing Paley's activist expansion in 1980, Gelfant writes: “Her area for political

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16 Goffman's 2000 article titled “Grace Paley's Faith: The Journey Homeward, the Journey Forward” offers an insightful analysis of the short story writer's politics within a literary and political framework. In particular, Goffman examines how Paley represents the African American culture, which reflects a personal knowledge of her own otherness.

17 Norwich's essay about Paley in “The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women” offered within the Jewish Women's Archive website provides a comprehensive biography of this author's life. It includes an overview of her career, family and education, political activism, and feminist portrayal of Jewish identity.
activity has expanded from the neighborhood around Washington Square Park, to Washington, D.C., to the world” (Gelfant 286). Gradually, Paley moved from disciplined fights for local issues to journeys to the United States capital and international sites deserving of political attention.

While simultaneously publishing literary fiction, Paley also applied her writing talents to weave together thoughtful essays on her activist endeavors, explaining the value of community-centered unity, nonviolence, and her feminist identity. To illustrate Paley's dedication to the political side of her life and the resulting essays that emerged from these experiences, Darcy L. Brandel offers a thorough summary of this author's work in relation to such activist efforts. She describes Paley's multiple arrests during demonstrations, how the writer traveled as a delegate to Vietnam in 1969 to help bring home three American prisoners of war, and her decisive role in consolidating complex ideas from numerous activists into the eloquently expressed “Women’s Pentagon Action Unity Statement” in 1982. Brandel notes that this piece “was one of the earliest manifestos to draw explicit connections between issues such as violence, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, the global capitalist economy, the nuclear arms race, and the environment” (Brandel 77). What's more, the detailed declaration against social mistreatment of all kinds originated from more than two hundred women providing input to Paley. The final result is a definitive articulation of concepts that deserve attention to foster relevant societal

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18 Gelfant's article titled “Grace Paley: Fragments for a Portrait in Collage” offers a thoughtfully comprehensive view of this author from multiple dimensions. In addition to providing a detailed biography, Gelfant offers a timeline of Paley's participation in various protests beginning in 1961.

19 Brandel's 2010 article titled “Performing Invisibility: Dialogue as Activism in Grace Paley's Texts” looks at the author's focus on speech and dialogue within the prism of social protests. In addition, she examines the ways that Paley's texts forge substantial connections to her political work. Brandel's article offers a beneficial close reading of the short story writer's activist endeavors as they specifically relate to her body of short fiction.
change. Exhibiting typical humility, Paley describes her role as part of this collaborative and rewarding process in the introduction to the section titled “More” within her semi-autobiography *Just As I Thought*. “I would write that statement. It was an honor for me, and of course the women were also relieved that someone would do the job” (Paley 127). Despite modestly deemphasizing her essential function in this endeavor, the actual testimony reveals an artful ability to display impassioned inclusiveness, where the contributions of women from all backgrounds, ages, and histories unite to push for an essential rethinking of society's priorities.

From the start, Paley shows the power of such forceful teamwork:

> We are women who come in most part from the northeastern region of our United States. We are city women who know the the wreckage and fear of city streets; we are country women who grieve the loss of the small farm and have lived on the poisoned earth. We are young and older, we are married, single, lesbian. We live in different kinds of households, in groups, in families, alone, some are single parents. We work at a variety of jobs. We are students-teachers-factory workers-office workers-lawyers-farmers-doctors-builders-waitresses-weavers-poets-engineers-homeworkers-electricians-artists-blacksmiths. We are all daughters and sisters. (Paley 142)

She then continues in a relentless tone of factual outrage at how violence, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and an all-around culture of hatred dismantle society and degrade every principle of human rights. In conclusion, Paley ends this powerful declaration without ambiguity:

> We will not allow these violent games to continue. If we are here in our stubborn thousands today, we will certainly return in the hundreds of thousands in the months and years to come. We know there is a healthy, sensible, loving way to live and we intend to live that way in our neighborhoods and our farms in these United States, and among our sisters and brothers in all the countries of the world. (Paley 147)

Throughout this piece, Paley confronts a multitude of wrongs imposed on society due to an overall mindset of cultural aggression that shows no regard for the unmistakable value of life. Furthermore, she demonstrates that this statement embodies a collective protest by women from
all areas of experience who have come together to demand a substantial revisiting of America's system of morals. In Paley's report on the complicated coordination involved to represent a myriad of women's voices, she notes that the final document had some dissenters. Yet Paley also adds that the essence of everyone's beliefs were expressed in the ultimate version. She writes: “It was exactly, at some length, what everybody believed and hoped. Me too. I've included it, since the writing was my responsibility” (Paley 127). Indeed, Paley felt proud of the resulting piece and its underlying motivation to galvanize, to provoke an awareness meant to instigate imperative societal reform. By joining forces with other impassioned women to influence in positive ways, Paley experienced a tangible purpose that she cherished. Such endeavors cultivated profound connections with like-minded activists, which enabled Paley to form long-standing friendships as well as a deeper understanding of American womanhood. She could commiserate while forming consequential alliances to accomplish important societal work.

Alongside Paley's heartfelt activist efforts, she reveals an intense interest in the actual lived experiences of women to celebrate a connectedness previously absent from American literature. While Paley's feminist voice comes across with great power in the “Women’s Pentagon Action Unity Statement,” her commitment to represent the stories of regular working women is the centerpiece her fiction explores. She delivers a body of work that celebrates small triumphs and underscores subtle signs of abuse in relationships, among other, commonly unarticulated elements of interaction, crucial for an especial understanding of Jewish-American womanhood. Her short stories bring to life frequently unobserved nuances that both improve as well as complicate the world, seen mostly through the eyes of women characters seeking balance, an extensive understanding of the world in which they live, and the emotional comforts
that prosper from camaraderie. With a focus on subtle signals, where action only contributes an undercurrent within each story's singular progress, Paley's work focuses on the understated moments of verbal exchanges. How people, particularly women, interrelate with the universe around them registers high on Paley's intricate priority list. Like Yezierska and Parker, Paley looks closely at the ways that societal alienation and unspoken estrangement intermingle to influence her protagonists' response to their settings. But Paley differs from the above-mentioned authors in that she repeatedly studies the community's togetherness against an outside world bereft of compassion or even an interest in the specific population that resides within its borders. While Yezierska and Parker regularly sculpt their stories around an individual woman's struggle against a dismissive culture, one that epitomizes callousness at every turn, Paley investigates the collective spirit of womanhood in an attempt to generate a welcoming communal space and somehow counteract alienation. Even with her featured heroine Faith Darwin Asbury, Paley relates each story through this protagonist's own, sometimes distorted perspective while also embroidering a supportive web of peers and neighbors who regularly appear, embodying essential roles that connect the community together.

To portray these elaborate threads in her stories, where she looked at the real lives of women within the context of an unconcerned larger world, Paley applied thoughtful instruction to her art. Before marrying Jess Paley and while working at various office jobs, she took a course with W. H. Auden that substantially changed how the future fiction author approached her writing. During this time, Auden happened to be teaching at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan to avoid England because of that nation's war years. His availability at this particular juncture in Paley's life made an enormous difference not only with her writing method,
but also concerning her self-confidence as an intellectually capable student. Prior to enrolling in Auden's course, Paley felt wary of higher education after previously dropping out of college. Blanche Gelfant delineates Paley's hesitation to pursue a degree in the short story writer's own words:

I would go to school but I could never get up to the classroom. I could sometimes get to the first floor, but I couldn't get into the classroom. I would meet someone, and talk to them, and that would be it. You know, a conversation anyplace stopped me from doing anything. (Gelfant 287)

Although Paley struggled with feelings of inadequacy in educational settings since high school, she overcame these worries to register for Auden's course. Arcana describes how Auden's feedback revolutionized the way Paley translated her ideas into written form. In addition to conveying Paley's creative growth, Arcana integrates the author's own insights about the course's positive effects. Among her many interviews with Arcana, Paley shares her memory of this event, specifically discussing the moment she summoned ample courage to speak in Auden's class:

Of course I was one of about two hundred people in the class, which met in one of these big lecture halls, but I did a very brave thing. He asked, “Are there any poets? Are there any people here who would like me to see their work?” And I put my hand up. I still can't believe that I put my hand up, since I hadn't spoken a word for three years in high school. So he took [my poems] and then I met him for lunch and we talked. (Arcana 43)

Because of this unexpected fearlessness and through Auden's subsequent encouragement, Paley learned how to express ideas in her own language. Prior to taking Auden's course, Paley incorporated words into her poems that she never used in general conversation. But she had previously believed that successful writing needed to fit a generic image of great literature to earn an enthusiastic reception. Thanks to Auden's gentle guidance, though, Paley soon
abandoned this technique to develop her own voice, where her selected wording reflected distinct
descriptions of the world that she witnessed. According to Arcana, Auden instructed Paley “to
write what she actually heard and spoke - instead of the language of an upper-middle-class
Englishman, which was the voice of the poetry she had been listening to in her head” (Arcana
43-44). Through Auden, Paley discovered she could establish a meaningful written landscape
that did not comply with an elevated speech pattern she believed would be more acceptable to
readers. Adding further dimension, Paley depicts this eye-opening episode of her writing life
within the essay titled “Clearing My Jewish Throat.”\(^2\) While narrating the key instance that
helped to define her as a writer, Paley recounts how Auden first responded to her poems: “He
asked me if I used words like ‘subaltern’ frequently. He pointed out in my poems a couple of
first-class British English expressions. ‘Well, sometimes we say that,’ I said. I understood that he
thought I ought to try writing in American. But I couldn't, despite the fact, the audible fact, that I
spoke a pure Bronx, New York American English” (Paley 15). Though Paley expressed surprise
at Auden's instruction when he asked her such pointed questions, this experience initiated her
first step into writing authentically, enabling the author to create stories born from her own
perspective of the world.

In fact, Paley's first work of published fiction might be viewed in light of Auden's
influence because of its original and quite lively voice, merging language familiar to her into a
story that focuses on the triumph over loneliness. This unconventional work titled “Goodbye and
Good Luck” opens Paley's inaugural collection of stories The Little Disturbances of Man (1959).

\(^2\) This essay appears in a 2005 collection of works by multiple Jewish writers, including Cynthia Ozick, Saul
Bellow, E.L. Doctorow, and Philip Roth, titled *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer.*
Edited by Derek Rubin, this book showcases writers of Jewish descent from numerous genres, where the authors
discuss their Judaic identities in the context of their work.
Shaina Hammerman and Naomi Seidman regard this particular story as significant, particularly in its skillful navigation of speech and explain how Paley's arrival on the American literary scene corresponds with a fresh generation of Jewish writers. Citing Judaic scholar Julian Levinson's description of this era as the “Jewish American Renaissance”21 of America's postwar period, Hammerman and Seidman celebrate Paley's great recognition as one of the few Jewish women writers featured in this age. Furthermore, they argue Paley's distinction surpasses her distinguished Jewish contemporaries, including Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Norman Mailer, because her narrative demonstrates a singular experimentation with the English language. In Hammerman and Seidman's view, Paley incorporates Yiddish into her protagonist's verbal expressions, where "the very tension between these linguistic possibilities opens space for an English style beholding to no other language but itself" (Hammerman and Seidman 193).22 Expertly integrating Yiddish-inflected speech into this story, Paley writes a first-person narrative that follows her heroine Rosie Lieber's quirky, often heartbreaking romance with Volodya Vlashkin, an alluring star of the Russian Art Theater of Second Avenue. From the story's opening lines, Paley shows Rosie has a trusted audience. She speaks directly to a relative who, Paley soon reveals, happens to be her niece Lillie. This seemingly minor detail signifies a profound facet of Paley's complex work, according to Hammerman and Seidman. These thinkers claim that through this story:

21 Julian Levinson is an Associate Professor of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. He also holds the Shetzer Chair in American Jewish Studies. Hammerman and Seidman refer to his 2008 book Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture.

22 Hammerman and Seidman's 2012 article titled “Between Aunt and Niece Grace Paley and the Jewish American ‘Swerve’” specifically looks at the relevance of this short story in the author's body of work. Their focus centers on the importance of allowing women's voices tell stories of Jewish life. To these thinkers, Paley's decision to allow the “mother-aunts and secret sisters” share their perspective opens up an innovative discovery of vantage points not customarily explored in American literature.
Paley discovers, mobilizes, recreates, and celebrates the marginalized experience and distinctive idiom of a childless Jewish aunt, finding within this experience and voice an alternative not only to the cultural legacy offered by her mother and grandmother, but also to the speech patterns of a more acculturated generation of American Jews. (Hammerman and Seidman 186)

Within this lens of an affectionate aunt-niece relationship, one inspired by Paley's own close family connections, Rosie describes initially meeting Vlashkin when she took a job as a ticket seller at the theater many years earlier, content to occupy an anonymous presence. Even with Rosie’s unassuming nature, Vlashkin refuses to allow her to shrink into invisibility. He even declares, “‘Who is responsible for hiding this wonderful young person in a cage?’” (Paley 4). Although the theater’s manager straightforwardly replies that all ticket sellers sit in that area, Vlashkin ignores this reality, singling out Rosie to lavish her with immense affection from the start.

Despite Vlashkin's long-standing marriage, which Rosie only discovers years later, she becomes involved in a serious romance with him, fascinated by his dramatic effect on other women while she so often remains unseen. Regularly, Rosie witnesses this impassioned response to Vlashkin by women who come to see him perform as she sits alone in the ticket booth, her obscurity becoming more pronounced: “‘I cried to think who I was – nothing – and such a man could look at me with interest’” (Paley 6). It amazes Rosie that such a famous and beloved Yiddish actor would offer someone as insignificant as herself any attention at all. Throughout these early years, she feels immaterial, just one of Vlashkin's multiple admirers. Yet no jealousy or resentment are ever present in her thoughts, only an acceptance of her own interchangeability with every other woman who desires this older, more sophisticated man. When Vlashkin secures a reasonably priced room for Rosie near the theater, offering a welcome chance to move out of
the family's household, her mother unleashes a ferocious amount of disapproval. Rosie responds by gently informing her mother that this move is “driven by love” (Paley 6) and reflects a different notion of living, which only intensifies the rage that explodes on her in return. During this tirade, her mother reinforces Rosie's own intuition that she does not matter, further corroborating her own negative self-image: “You! You, a nothing, a rotten hole in a piece of cheese, are you telling me what is life?” (Paley 6). Though hurt at first by this dismissal, Rosie reasons that her mother had suffered in a miserable marriage, acknowledging the bitter unhappiness such an absence of intimacy could cause. The portrait that Paley presents suggests immense isolation, where Rosie’s family lacks any support network beyond the privacy of home to combat personal anguish. As a result, this desolation only amplifies, unable to be mitigated by the benefits of community commiseration and understanding to lessen the pain. That bleak reality impacts Rosie’s relationship with her mother and deepens the divisions between them. To complicate this dynamic, Chris Witter discusses the uneasiness that develops because Rosie wishes for a lifestyle unattainable to her mother. He singles out this traumatic disconnect as emblematic of Rosie's desire for more than the traditional existence ascribed to Jewish women of that period:

Rose rejects and is rejected by the working world of labour-intensive drudgery. Likewise, she rejects the patriarchal division of labour inscribed in ‘traditional’ Jewish gender roles – and the concomitant limiting of personal mobility and autonomy. She laments her mother’s marriage to “who she didn’t like” [sic] and rejects the life of her sister, who “waits in a spotless kitchen for a kind word.” (Witter 112)²³

While Rose does not regard herself as a trailblazer or as someone who exhibits any courage,

²³ Witter's 2013 article titled “Grace Paley and the Tenement Pastoral” argues that the short story writer routinely received the label of a Jewish feminist who authors early postmodern fiction. However, Witter believes a valid case can be made to view Paley’s stories through the lens of the ethnic working-class movement as well.
Witter insightfully identifies the substance of this character's resistance to oppressive norms. Throughout descriptions of this emotional ordeal and Rosie's quiet, persistent desire to make a home on her own terms, Paley artfully blends in the present day as the now middle-aged aunt shares meaningful wisdom she has gained to a much younger niece. After depicting this philosophical approach to her mother's outburst, Rosie confides: “This was my independence, Lillie dear, blooming, but it didn't have no roots and its face was paper” (Paley 7). Weaving authentic voice together with a strong sentiment for the pursuit of separate dreams from family expectations, Paley represents a heroine marginalized on multiple levels yet unwilling to acquiesce. Furthermore, Rose's affectionate language illustrates an emotional intimacy with Lillie, a genuine trust and care that flourishes so warmly between aunt and niece. According to Hammerman and Seidman, this facet of the story offers great significance. They view Paley's depiction as a commemoration of motherhood, an exuberant recognition of the various roles women often play in teaching, nurturing, and providing most welcome support, even when they are not biological mothers themselves:

Paley's literary blurring of the normatively clear boundaries between mothers and not-mothers is a paean to the pleasures of group parenting, a recognition of other forms than the nuclear triangle. But her descriptions of this motherhood beyond the nuclear family functions as well as a protest against a male-dominated literary canon, where the mother is routinely mocked by 'her son the novelist' [...] In this sense, Paley's celebration of mothers and recognition of a variety of modes of motherhood beyond the biological, uncovers along a new axis what Gilbert and Gubar call the ‘secret sisterhood’ of women writers, who ease the woman writer's isolation and provide support for her enterprise. (Hammerman and Seidman 197)

Paley personally understood the advantages of multiple mother figures, feeling the devoted concern and love from other women in her own household. Even though she did not express appreciation for this affectionate support while in the midst of this experience, Paley’s story
might be seen as a tribute to this important caregiving. Her portrayal of Rose reflects such dedication, even though Lillie never speaks a word. Hammerman and Seidman take this notion of sister mothers to an even more inspiring level, explaining how such positive representations of womanhood confront the problematic distortions of a male-centered literary canon. Indeed, Paley's accomplishment manifests a powerful statement that helps all women writers excel beyond an underlying misogyny to portray womanhood in all its wondrous intricacies.

In this particular portrayal of a Jewish-American woman, Paley delineates Rosie as humble, searching for her own space within the larger world, navigating its complexities alone. She never mentions the presence of other women friends to soften and help negotiate the difficult circumstances of her journey. Within this story, Lillie serves as Rosie’s only sympathetic connection and sounding board. She epitomizes the community where Rose can share all of the experiences that build toward her now mature womanhood. At one point, Rose boasts to Lillie about how other men besides Vlashkin also pursued her during these younger years. Energetically, Rosie states: “I put this in to show you your old fat aunt was not crazy out of loneliness. In those noisy years I had friends among interesting people who admired me for reasons of youth and that I was a first-class listener” (Paley 7). Using a humorous tone blended with poignancy, Paley conveys Rosie's spirit as well as her longing need for companionship, which causes further vulnerability. While well aware of Vlashkin's capacity to attract numerous women, Rosie does not know that her captivating boyfriend has a wife and family until long after establishing this romantic connection with him. Upon her eventual confrontation, Vlashkin identifies himself as the actual victim and claims that his visits to Rosie's rented space are a necessary reprieve from the challenges of his life: “‘Little girl, I have told you a hundred times,
this small room is the convent of my troubled spirit. Here I come to your innocent shelter to refresh myself in the midst of an agonized life"” (Paley 7). Within his condescending explanation of his actions, he never apologizes for misleading the young woman. Indeed, he responds as if a rationale exists to explain these evident lies. Furthermore, his statement reveals a narcissistic objectification of Rosie, expressing an entitlement of sorts to take advantage of the privacy as well as the assumed affection that her home supplies.

In contrast to Vlashkin's extreme lack of empathy, Rosie feels heartbroken about contributing to such marital disloyalty, which she grapples with by herself to face this guilt. Her shame solidifies even further when Rosie meets Mrs. Vlashkin at the theater one evening. From her post, Rosie watches Vlashkin's spouse closely, experiencing an even more profound affinity with the married woman:

She sat at a small table speaking in a deep voice to whoever stopped a moment to converse. Her Yiddish was perfect, each word cut like a special jewel. I looked at her. She noticed me like she noticed everybody, cold like Christmas morning. Then she got tired. Vlashkin called a taxi and I never saw her again. Poor woman, she did not know I was on the same stage with her. The poison I was to her role, she did not know. (Paley 8)

Although Mrs. Vlashkin has no awareness of Rosie’s romantic presence in her husband's life, the guilt becomes too much for this protagonist to bear. Later that night, she informs Vlashkin that the affair cannot continue. Despite his argument, patronizing Rosie with the term “‘girlie’” (Paley 8), she refuses to change her mind and dismisses him from her life with the phrase “‘goodbye, good luck’” (Paley 8). In spite of showing strength and integrity, the sadness at such a loss overwhelms Rosie to the point of needing to return to her family home. So soon afterward, Rosie leaves for a week to avoid Vlashkin. She stays with her mother and deliberately keeps busy by cleaning the entire house. Ironically, Rosie has so few options to find solace that she
must go back to a place that instigates pain as well as what might even be seen as deliberate misunderstanding. While her mother feels appreciative of Rosie's extensive effort, she still emotionally abuses her daughter. At one point, she even derides the miserable circumstances behind Rosie's return and announces: “If you live like a bum, you are finally a lunatic” (Paley 8). Indeed, the people closest to Rosie, those naturally tasked with the responsibility to look out for her best interests, epitomize pure heartlessness at most every opportunity. As a result, Paley paints a picture that reinforces Rosie's lonesome feelings, even though the tone never hesitates in its lighthearted and humorous flavor.

These interlinking threads of mistreatment do not weigh Rose down, however, for she always accepts the bad behavior of others, automatically excusing their actions to forge ahead as a free, independent spirit without self-pity. As she relates her controversial romance to Lillie, Rosie reveals that she later learned how an actress from the theater company had written a book about a long-standing affair with Vlashkin. This fact suggests that Rosie blended with countless competitors for the actor's vital affection. But instead of holding Vlashkin responsible, she criticizes her opponent, who may have also been young and vulnerable like Rosie, susceptible to a vivacious man's charms to overcome loneliness. Likely due to such a rivalry, Rosie blames this woman for disregarding Vlashkin's marital vows, even while obviously aware of his own self-centeredness. Still, she censures the book’s author for publishing a scandalous story about Vlashkin “without respect for him, his wife and children, or even others who also may have feelings in the matter” (Paley 10). In the same breath that she overlooks Vlashkin's own guilt, Rosie then entirely absolves him of his adulterous transgressions, categorizing these self-indulgent activities as worthy sacrifices for his art:
Now, Lillie, don't be surprised. This is called a fact of life. An actor's soul must be like a diamond. The more faces it got the more shining in his name. Honey, you will no doubt love and marry one man and have a couple kids and be happy forever till you die tired. More than that, a person like us don't have to know. But a great artist like Volodya Vlashkin ... in order to make a job on the stage, he's got to practice. I understand it now, to him life is like a rehearsal. (Paley 10)

Although Rosie previously exhibited the dignity to remove this deceptive man from her life, she still portrays him in a positive light he does not deserve, ready to surrender her own morals in pursuit of sweeping forgiveness. To consider her logic, Vlashkin's art, an extension of his mammoth ego, should come before her own honor. Yet Bonnie Lyons offers a logical explanation for Rose's convenient tendency to overlook Vlashkin's betrayals, describing the powerful function of cultural values: “The immigrants' limitless adoration for the Yiddish actor is embodied in Rosie's endless forgiveness of her lover's sexual infidelities and vanities because he is a Yiddish actor” (Lyons 27). In other words, Vlashkin's glamorous profession grants this charismatic man a special license to deceive at will, exonerating him from behaving with honor and loyalty toward the immigrants he charms. Despite Rose's eventual strength to extract herself from him as a romantic partner at this point in her story, she still makes excuses for his behavior, somehow compelled to maintain that treasured attachment. Perhaps if Rosie connected with other women who were also victims of Vlashkin’s extravagant appeal, seeing the similar effects on their lives instead of struggling with her conflicted emotions alone, she might have been better equipped to resist him. But the unavailability of such an important network means that Rosie lacks this helpful context. As a consequence, she villainizes the actor’s past conquests, even though they likely share comparable experiences to her own as casualties of his seduction.

Over the years, as Rosie watches Vlashkin age and the theater eventually closes its doors, her eager attachment and yearning for him only escalates. Once he retires and the nearly
shuttered theater throws him a dinner in his honor, Rosie feels great sadness at their parting. She thinks about this loss as the party ends: “Finished. This is your lonesome bed. A lady what they call fat and fifty. You made it personally. From this lonesome bed you will finally fall to a bed not so lonesome, only crowded with a million bones” (Paley 11). Even though Rosie fully realizes that Vlashkin lacks the capability to care about anyone beyond his own needs, she shows a willingness to cast that judgment aside in favor of glorifying him at all costs. So when he calls to restart their romance from so many years earlier, Rosie happily informs her niece of this development. She explains how he described his wife's decision to divorce him for adultery. Yet Rosie shares that more tension existed in this long-standing union beyond such marital offenses. Due to Vlashkin's retirement, a reality that caused his constant presence around the house, Vlashkin's wife felt frustrated by his constant dependence on her. Though Vlashkin's admissions, a picture evolves of him as helpless, eager to rely on any woman to supply his meals and provide some form of companionship. This dependence does not seem to bother Rosie as she describes Vlashkin's reemergence in her life. However, she implies that her former boyfriend seemed to view her presence as a replacement to provide companionship, someone to be his avid audience and provide sustenance of every kind to gratify his voracious demands. But according to Paley's heroine, he wanted all of the benefits of this intimacy while also resisting the idea of marriage after almost fifty years of a union that ended with such bitterness.

For once, however, Rosie refuses to accept these one-sided terms and puts her longing for connection at risk to assert an emotional agreement that suits her needs to the fullest. Proudly, Rosie reports to her niece that she has negotiated her greatest desire within this newly reinstated romance. In the process, Rosie overcomes the isolation that she suffered through for so many
years. Defying Vlashkin's vague and undefined commitment, Rosie argues against his expectations of travel and leisure without the legitimacy of marriage: “‘How could you ask me to go with you on trains to stay in strange hotels, among Americans, not your wife? Be ashamed’” (Paley 12-13). Rosie's assertion, where she vehemently represents what she wants out of the bargain and indicates a readiness to reject Vlashkin's overtures otherwise, proves her growth and maturity. Still, a close reading of Rosie's words demonstrates that she feels a greater concern about image, reflecting an anxiety for the appearances of traveling without marital security rather than a value of the bond itself. Her specific reference to Americans also suggests an eager interest in cultural acceptance, which she apparently believes marriage will supply. Actual love comes across as quite secondary in Rosie's depiction and testifies to an underlying weakness within her attachment to Vlashkin. But Rosie does not detect any considerable fractures in this romance and announces her delight to Lillie that she will finally become a wife:

So now, darling Lillie, tell this story to your mama from your young mouth. She don't listen to a word from me. She only screams, “I'll faint. I'll faint.” Tell her after all I'll have a husband, which, as everybody knows, a woman should have at least one before the end of the story. (Paley 13)

Indeed, Rosie's excitement over her new status overshadows the fact that Vlashkin will be her spouse. He becomes just as amorphous as the never-ending array of women he once socialized with romantically during his sexual prime. At this stage, he seems more like a caged animal who benefits from another's caregiving than an appreciative spouse. But that detail appears immaterial to Rosie due to her victory in securing a husband. Gloria L. Cronin remarks upon the pitiable yet comic nature of Rose's long-awaited victory from the now debilitated Vlashkin: “Despite the fact that he is moments short of elderly disintegration, she feels both vindicated and avenged [...] Her
triumph is both pathetic and hilarious” (Cronin 142). While Paley never inserts any guidance concerning how to view Rosie's gaiety in relation to the actual circumstances of this union, a fascinating combination of humor and sadness peer through the narrator's interpretation of this turn of events in her life. Based on the proven character of her future husband, his disposition to use any viable resource without concern for others' emotions, this marriage can never provide the level of nourishment Rosie envisions and her loneliness will certainly not disappear. Perhaps the same could be said about Vlashkin's gain, though, since Rose elevates the status of being a wife over the specific relationship that promotes her to this coveted title. For both future spouses, their personal foibles will not be surpassed or resolved by the romantic partnership between them because of the hollowness at its core, inevitably resulting in a predictable estrangement neither one could ever acknowledge.

Identity and the desire for acceptance also intertwine in a second early story by Paley, where the complex clash between mainstream dominance, spiritual friction, and a Jewish adolescent's need to be heard overcome ethnic alienation in favor of hope. Paley's frequently anthologized work titled “The Loudest Voice,” also featured within The Little Disturbances of Man, offers a complicated look at these themes. In her misleadingly simple story, Paley addresses the painful process of assimilation and examines its specific cost to the Jewish heritage as an anguished reality immigrants must face while rebuilding their lives in a new world. Also written in the first person, this piece differs from “Goodbye and Good Luck” due to its

24 In Cronin’s 1992 article titled “Melodramas of Beset Womanhood: Resistance, Subversion, and Survival in the Fiction of Grace Paley,” the author discusses how this short story writer offers an inspiring view of women's survival despite cultural odds. Even with the challenging, often alienating circumstances that her characters must endure, they still remain open to the world around them, eager to take advantage of what resources necessary to achieve their most passionate desires.
perspective on the spectrum of time. While Rose Lieber looks back on her controversial history with Vlashkin, eventually returning to the present with her announced marriage, Shirley Abramowitz stays consistent in reflecting on her childhood from the vantage point of an adult. As the narrator, she weaves wisdom and thoughtful insight into this story about the foreseeable religious division that marginalizes a particular Jewish community during the Christmas holiday season. This story begins with Shirley describing how her mother once had to defend the young child's noisy, playful presence in a supermarket. Annoyed, the grocer demands that the little girl stop causing so much racket before he angrily marches away from the stunned mother and daughter. After his departure, Shirley's parent begs her to calm down. In recalling this moment, expressing a tone of great frustration, the narrator's adult persona comments on these active attempts to muffle her: “In that place the whole street groans: Be quiet! Be quiet! but steals from the happy chorus of my inside self not a tittle or a jot” (Paley 34). Paley's heroine relates this campaign to suppress her, to silence her voice whenever possible, even while just happily announcing Campbell's soup names by the pickle barrel. Amidst members of her own culture, both family and community members, she finds herself viewed as an annoyance due to her exuberant nature.

While Shirley regularly experiences reproach from those who know her best, the narrator's vitality attracts the exact opposite response from teachers at school, which mitigates the unspoken divisions in her home life. One morning, a monitor pulls her from line to meet with a sixth-grade teacher named Mr. Hilton, immediately summoning her to his classroom. He tells Shirley that her clear, loud voice would be perfect for a role in the school's Christmas play currently in production. With absolute delight, Shirley becomes immersed in the presentation.
along with many of the other Jewish children attending this elementary school. Paley's narrator describes the teachers' pleasure at this enthusiasm and offers a revealing snippet. One instructor expresses ecstatic surprise at how the children learned “Holy Night” so easily, reciting without error. The student teacher exclaims: “‘To think that some of you don't even speak the language!’” (Paley 36). To this educator, the young students' eager absorption of American culture prevails over any preservation of their Judaic roots. Although the school happens to be located in a Jewish neighborhood, she feels no alarm that the kids' religious identities might be engulfed by mainstream forces that actively prioritize Christianity over their heritage. But Shirley's mother feels appalled by this reality when details of the Christmas production trickle throughout the community. She relates this apprehension to her husband and he offers her his own vantage point. To him, the religious sacrifices that America demands are inconsequential compared to other nations' stipulations from Jews, where horrific violence regularly occurs: “‘You're in America! Clara, you wanted to come here. In Palestine the Arabs would be eating you alive. Europe you had pogroms. Argentina is full of Indians. Here you got Christmas...Some joke, ha?’” (Paley 36). According to Shirley’s father, the curriculum in her school, which teaches Christmas songs, poses a lesser threat to Judaism than the alternatives they had considered as a family. But her mother does not feel comforted by this reasoning. Instead, she responds with frustration, upset at her husband’s manner of minimizing this serious issue:

    Very funny, Misha. What is becoming of you? If we came to a new country a long time ago to run away from tyrants, and instead we fall into a creeping pogrom, that our children learn a lot of lies, so what's the joke? Ach, Misha, your idealism is going away. (Paley 36)

Indeed, the narrator's mother sees America's indoctrination of her daughter as constituting the same level of danger against Judaic tradition as other countries' actions. No matter how mild the
new world's influence might appear in this mother’s view, it amounts to clear efforts to dilute Jewish traditions until full assimilation occurs. Furthermore, she feels distressed that her husband dismisses this anxiety, showing an unquestioning readiness to adopt the American way of life, too.

While Shirley's parents debate her participation in this Christmas play, she continues to become closer with Mr. Hilton, eventually developing into his much-valued assistant. The fondness that Shirley earns from him due to her faithful fulfillment of his instructions, including loud commands to direct the actors, bears a sharp contrast with the annoyance directed toward her at home. One evening, her father complains about Shirley's absence, wondering what prevents her from putting the plates on the table before dinner. Yet upon his wife's icy reply that the Christmas production has caused their daughter's delay, his attitude instantly shifts to a more philosophical mindset. He speaks of Christmas as a pagan holiday, like Hanukkah, accessible to everyone, not just those who identify as Christians. After explaining that history belongs to all, he closes this adamant speech with a defense of their daughter, arguing to his wife: “Does it hurt Shirley to learn to speak up? It does not. So maybe someday she won't live between the kitchen and the shop. She's not a fool” (Paley 38). Shirley's present-day narration immediately responds to her father's words, spoken so long ago during her childhood, and conveys gratitude: “I thank you, Papa, for your kindness. It is true about me to this day. I am foolish but I am not a fool” (Paley 38). The fact that her father encourages Shirley to navigate America's offerings beyond Judaism's borders and without fear or suspicion fosters a warm sense of connection to this heroine. Whether Christian forces view this outlook in a reciprocal, mutually respectful manner or not, Shirley can join the larger society and not worry about losing part of her cultural identity
in the process. Therefore, despite Judaism’s minority status, Shirley’s father wants her to feel confident, able to participate in the community where they now live, and refrain from isolating herself. Lori Lefkovitz examines how Shirley's father and Mr. Hilton both reinforce that same essential message, encouraging this heroine to take part in the world that surrounds her:

Shirley's faith that she commands God's privileged attention has been inspired by the male teacher [...] who directs the pageant and repeatedly tells Shirley that he doesn't know what he'd do without her, and by her father, whose own optimism is rooted in his aspirations for the daughter whom he admires [...] who identifies with him [...] who knows that it doesn't hurt for her to learn to speak up, and for whom he has expectations of a better professional future than his own, one beyond the space between the kitchen and the shop, expectations that the reader has every reason to suspect are amply justified by Shirley's alter-ego, Grace Paley. (Lefkovitz 100)25

Beyond an expected alienation that can result from the dominant Christian holiday's greater cultural importance, Shirley's father urges his daughter to navigate this foreign society successfully. He does not linger on any religious injustices since they are a reality of this country that the family has selected as its new homeland.

That same mindset, more or less, radiates to the entire community by the evening of this Christmas play's performance, bringing the neighborhood together to watch the much-anticipated production. In a swirl of nervous energy and expectation, the show proceeds smoothly and Shirley fulfills her long-practiced role with ease. Afterward, she overhears her parents and a neighbor in the family's kitchen discussing the evening's activities. Their conversation moves from Yiddish to Russian and, finally, to Polish, a rich fusion of languages that describe how Christian children born knowing English possess certain key advantages. Because of their native

25 In Lefkovitz's 2009 article “‘Does It Hurt Shirley to Learn to Speak Up?’ Tevye's New World Legacy in the Jewish Daughter's Father,” the author specifically looks at stories that focus on the father-daughter relationship through the prism of Judaism. She offers thoughtful and personal insights that enhance this particular piece's poignant analysis within Judaic culture.
familiarity with the American culture and its vernacular, Shirley’s peers have advantages that she may not experience, potentially excluding her. But this reality does not interfere with the narrator’s joy after such a successful production. From her bedroom, Shirley responds to herself by merging the two religious forces to demonstrate their capacity to coexist: “Too sleepy, I climbed out of bed and kneeled. I made a little church of my hands and said, ‘Hear, O Israel’” (Paley 40). Both Judaism and Christianity join together in Shirley's prayer, showing the companionable nature of these two religions, their ability to unify. Shirley's mature self concludes her story with the hope that separate religions can synthesize, embracing believers on both sides of the scope to eradicate alienation:

I was happy. I fell asleep at once. I had prayed for everybody: my talking family, cousins far away, passersby, and all the lonesome Christians. I expected to be heard. My voice was certainly the loudest. (Paley 40)

Paley's final sentences suggest Judaism's ability to unify different belief systems, as notated in Shirley's prayers. A kindness emanates from such an attitude, illustrating how warm-hearted concern may transcend religious boundaries to improve the world as a whole. Shirley's blessing blurs spiritual lines and situates assimilation in a joyous light that dramatically contrasts with her mother's own suspiciousness. To Shirley, authentic connectedness can happen no matter the religious differences. The innate links of humanity surpasss spiritual, cultural, and any other kind of distinctions. These conclusions appear to derive from Paley's own childhood experiences, where she eagerly listened to the adult conversations nearby and learned the value of inclusion, of embracing all of humanity, over the rigidity of religious boundaries cemented in stringent traditions.

Indeed, Paley avoids any focus on religious practice and treats Judaism strictly as an
ethnic identity that unites her characters in an important understanding within her early stories. For Paley's second collection of short fiction, Judaic identification has a more muted presence. In *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), the author offers three very sophisticated stories among the selections that feature her recurrent heroine Faith Darwin Asbury. Instead of any tangible plots, however, Paley employs a slice-of-life style to define each representation of this single, Jewish mother of two sons who relies more on the emotional support of neighborhood mothers than her own family members. “Faith in the Afternoon,” “Faith in a Tree,” and “The Long Distance Runner” provide Paley's most famous protagonist distinct vehicles for poignant explorations of familial estrangement, community attachment, and the urge to find a welcoming safe haven. Within each story, Paley examines multiple dimensions of Faith's life that allow this heroine to come alive with all of her inspired and lovable imperfections. “Faith in the Afternoon” supplies a poignant portrait of this protagonist's emotional disconnectedness from family. In contrast, “Faith in a Tree” shows Paley's heroine as more self-confident, even self-sufficient, and supremely alert to the dynamics below and around her from a heightened vantage point. Lastly, “The Long Distance Runner” depicts Faith's appreciation for the community of her past and her longing to find sanctuary in a frequently hostile world.

Between these three significant short stories, Paley integrates an undercurrent of personal estrangement and the subsequent need to cultivate a network to counteract devastating alienation. “Faith in the Afternoon” specifically establishes the heroine's low status among family and her hesitation to spend any time with relatives as a result. But when her parents suddenly choose to move from the comfort of their Coney Island home, where they lived among like-minded, Yiddish-speaking Jews, to the Children of Judea senior home, Faith feels pressured to visit.
However, the disparaging treatment that she receives from her sister, brother, and parents due to a recent change in her marital status causes Faith to dread initiating any contact. Although Faith's husband made the choice to abandon her and their two children, family members blame her for this painful development. To worsen this heartache further, they respond to her crisis with a dismissive lack of compassion:

No doubt about it, squinting in any direction she is absolutely miserable. She is ashamed of this before her parents. “You should get help,” says Hope. “Psychiatry was invented for people like you, Faithful,” says Charles. “My little blondie, life is short. I'll lay out a certain amount of cash,” says her father. “Where will you be a person,” says her mother [...] They are naturally disgusted with Faith and her ridiculous position right in the middle of prosperous times. They are ashamed of her willful unhappiness. All right! Shame then! Shame on them all! (Paley 148)

Such cavalier responses from her family members demonstrate the emotional disconnect that circulates in these shallow, disapproving relationships. Every relative casually diminishes the real anguish that Faith experiences, even suggesting the protagonist as less than a human being simply because of the rejection from her husband Ricardo.

To provide a vivid context of this virtually affectionless marriage, Paley illustrates Ricardo's apathetic treatment of Faith and shows the predictable unraveling of their already deficient union. In her narrative, Paley gives a brief history of Ricardo's shaky commitments to women, where he prefers to move freely between relationships. In fact, Ricardo only wed Faith because she happened to become pregnant. Just six weeks into the marriage, however, Faith suffered a miscarriage, needlessly uniting their lives. As a result, Ricardo “resigned himself to her love” (Paley 149), an action that does not denote actual commitment or love on his part. While Faith's family automatically criticizes her for this marital failure, Paley depicts the heroine's diligent effort to make the marriage succeed: “Faith is perfectly willing to say it herself,
to any good listener: she loved Ricardo. She began indeed to love herself, to love the properties which, for a couple of years anyway, extracted such heart-warming activity from him” (Paley 149). Due to these circumstances, Faith must bear the double burden of earning little support from family members in addition to feeling Ricardo's painful indifference toward her. The combination of both elements contributes to Faith's burgeoning alienation from those who, ideally, should care about her welfare the most. As Faith sits quietly in her parents' room, she listens to her mother's meandering speech about the heroine's “‘terrible temper’” (Paley 150), insinuating a justification for Ricardo's desertion. Then her mother encourages Faith to apologize in a vague attempt to appease Ricardo, even if no offense ever transpired. Eagerly, Faith's parent presses her to do whatever possible to lure Ricardo back: “‘just say you're sorry [...] Clean up the house, put in a steak. Tell the children be a little quiet, send them next door for the television. He'll be home before you know it [...] Do up your hair something special’” (Paley 150). In all of her mother's pushiness, however well-meaning, she never considers Ricardo's marital duty, immediately assuming, without evidence, that he represents the wronged party in this union. Therefore, she reinforces the secondary and quite powerless position that Faith embodies as the wife, where her capacity to seduce is the primary tool to maintain her husband's loyalty.

The numbing alienation that Faith experiences when faced with family expectations expands even further with her mother's antiquated notions of a wife's merely sexualized role in the marriage. Victoria Aarons observes that Paley's women characters endure a unique conflict in that they wrestle with identity. Again and again, these heroines struggle to determine their actual place of belonging in the world. Aarons also contends that Paley's representation of Judaism translates as an uncomfortable reminder of the past, which only reinforces her protagonists'
personal estrangement from their given culture. Specifically, Aarons believes that Faith suffers from “differing visions of the world. On the one hand, she remains connected to the world of the ‘fathers,’ as characterized by her parents, and on the other, she lives in a more modern America, a world seemingly free from the bonds of historical and religious dictates” (Aarons 385-386).

In a tragic sense, Faith finds herself suspended, unable to bridge the vast distance between both universes that compose her fragmented identity. Yet even with the unhappiness that family stirs in Faith, the reminder that she never quite feels whole, her mother also provides a beneficial service. She updates Faith on the latest news about friends from the old neighborhood, proving their lives are even more fractured than her own. Faith hears the tragedies of former acquaintances who suffer with an array of unfortunate circumstances ranging from disease to romantic betrayal to financial disaster. All of the overwhelming details assign Faith's life a different, much less disastrous perspective. Indeed, her heartbreak over Ricardo, while terrible, seems more manageable in comparison. Dena Mandel regards Faith's newfound awareness of others' anguish to be a pivotal element in this story. She argues: “the myth of American happiness has to be dispelled before Faith can recognize that her own personal sorrows can be alleviated to some degree by registering them against the greater suffering of those close to her heart” (Mandel 91).

This arousal of empathy mixed with a philosophical outlook foreshadows the most intensive sympathy to come.

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26 In Aarons's 1987 article titled “The Outsider within: Women in Contemporary Jewish-American Fiction,” this thinker looks at the problematic balance of recognizing immigrant origins while redefining what it means to be Jewish in a modern world. While Aarons recognizes the difficulties Jewish male writers face in aligning themselves with the contemporary American culture, she particularly studies the struggles of their female literary counterparts. She explains they confront a much more complex alienation because they are both estranged from and attracted to a tradition that so often excludes them.

27 Mandel's 1983 article “Keeping Up With Faith: Grace Paley's Sturdy American Jewess” examines the emotional growth of Faith Darwin Asbury through the series of short stories that feature her perspective.
Like Faith's mother, who appears to gain solace from relating details of old connections’ struggles, of advising her daughter on how to rescue a troubled marriage, the family patriarch shares a similar attitude of superiority. In announcing his idea to set up a workers' union at the senior home, to advocate for their rights, his condescending racism overshadows any generous intent: “I was going to organize the help, You know, the guards, the elevator boys – colored fellows, mostly. You notice, they're coming up in the world’” (Paley 158). Under the guise of helpful concern, he expresses scorn and supremacy, negating whatever actual care for these workers might exist beneath his insecurity. As Faith's father continues to reveal his patronizing attitude while they wander out of the facility together, he shares a jarring secret. Since moving into Children of Judea, he feels a gradual estrangement from Faith's mother as they both separately navigate the terrors of old age. At this moment, her parents' actual vulnerability becomes clear to Faith, exposed from the maddening bravado. Upon reaching the subway platform, her father's fragility and his lonely isolation become even more evident as Faith tries to part from him to pick up her kids. When he laughs at his sorrow, calling himself a “‘talky old man’” (Paley 159), Faith feels overwhelmed as she listens to him reminisce about his parenting days. Tears fill her eyes and he immediately exclaims, “‘my darling girl, excuse me’” (Paley 159) at the evident pain her response reflects. In this instant, just as Faith must part from her father, the first genuine expressions of empathic concern for her newfound challenges as a single mother are offered amid his sadness. He states to her: “‘Ah, I see now how the land lies. I see you have trouble. You picked yourself out a hard world to raise a family’” (Paley 159). With this simple observation, an acknowledgment of the reality of Faith's life, Paley lets that emotion flutter between this protagonist and her father as the pressure to leave continues to mount. But
once Faith kisses him goodbye and starts down the stairs, he begs her to come back soon. Yet when she asserts an unwillingness until she's happy again, the mocking returns. He calls Faith selfish and urges her to bring his grandsons because he loves “‘their little goyish faces’” (Paley 160), a jab at the boys' non-Jewish, paternal roots. To appease her father, extract herself from this awkwardness, and finally catch the train home, Faith agrees. In this touching moment of reconnection, tears stream down Faith's face as she gives him her hand through the rail, which he then touches to her cheeks. Despite the rockiness that preceded this quiet understanding, the two have finally come together, unifying with a welcome warmth that Faith did not feel from her father before.

But just as they make this profoundly important contact, that hard-won attachment is abruptly severed by an explosion from her father's gaseous stomach, shattering the mutual affection without notice, thus splitting them apart again. Paley writes: “And before she could turn away from the old age of his insulted face and run home down the subway stairs, he had dropped her sweating hand out of his own and turned away from her” (Paley 160). This last, most unpleasant separation, also the final sentence of the story, serves as an ultimate disconnect between Faith and her father. Furthermore, that concluding moment virtually redirects the story back to its mournful beginning, where Paley's heroine ponders an ashamed disengagement from her family. Yet one key difference remains in that by this unhappy, but somehow comic moment, Faith receives another reminder that isolation and emotional frailty are not unique to her alone. In their own way, whether through gossip and judgment or condescension mixed with racism, her parents also struggle with personal estrangements too unbearable to verbalize, demonstrating the pervasiveness of such complex divisions that remain forever unspoken, unresolved. Paley
quietly illustrates the complex, though sometimes invisible, presence of individual suffering, where Faith exists as part of a continuum of painful struggle, often endured without the support of others who may also be immersed in their own undetectable torments. Still, as a woman forging ahead without a man, her miseries are much more apparent and, unfortunately, subject to criticisms because the absence of a reliable male presence exposes her to cultural attacks that only exacerbate the ongoing urge to stay separate, to deny an ethnic identity that shames her.

Just as this short story gives Paley's heroine a thoughtful, sometimes quietly painful, means to delineate her alienation from the intricate levels of familial pain within the Darwin clan, “Faith in a Tree” shows how close community ties can overcome such overwhelming isolation. Written in the first person, Faith discusses her romantic loneliness in the opening lines with a humorously sarcastic reference to the local park:

Just when I most needed important conversation, a sniff of the man-wide world, that is, at least one brainy companion who could translate my friendly language into his tongue of undying carnal love, I was forced to lounge in our neighborhood park, surrounded by children. (Paley 175)

From the start, Paley establishes Faith's isolation and sadness at a life empty of intimacy. Built around Faith's own wandering thoughts, Paley offers a relaxed feel, where reflection, not physical action, drive the story's development, fortifying themes with trains of thought that deepen this heroine, making her much more vivid as a result. At one point, Faith describes how she had been the third baby in world history to fly on a commercial flight, which had been announced in all of the New York newspapers at the time. As Faith considers this life experience, how she had been sent to visit her grandmother in the care of flight attendants, she wonders at her mother's judgment:

What was my mother trying to prove? That I was independent? That she wasn't
the sort to hang on? That in the sensible, socialist, Zionist world of the future, she wouldn't cry at my wedding? “You're an American child. Free. Independent.” Now what does that mean? I have always required a man to be dependent on, even when it appeared that I had one already. I own two small boys whose dependence on me takes up my lumpen time and my bourgeois feelings. (Paley 177)

Here, again, Paley references Faith's disconnectedness, both from her mother and from the confusing notion of independence, an anecdote that provides this protagonist with greater dimension. The idea of self-sufficiency, which Faith's mother, apparently, wishes to encourage in her daughter, results in the exact opposite effect. Faith openly admits to possessing an intense neediness for a man in her life, an ardent desire instilled in her despite an upbringing that embraced contradiction. A fascinating complexity comes across with this introspection, even though its semi-humorous tone dampens the anger. The narrative attempt to alleviate Faith's outrage, though, does not extinguish this steady burning at the edges of her observations.

Throughout these meandering thoughts, she sits on a tree branch and observes the actions taking place in this park below, where her link to the activity remains somewhat distant. A few of the neighborhood mothers are also nearby, conversing with each other on park benches and watching their children interact around them. Faith notices some older fathers pass through this gathering and one whom she recognizes, a former tenants' rights organizer, asks whether she has heard from Ricardo. In a witty response to this question, which Faith undoubtedly hears often, she replies: “Ricardo even at the present moment when I am trying to talk with you in a civilized way, Ricardo has rolled his dove-gray brain into a glob of spit in order to fly secretly into my ear right off the poop deck of Faomaline's World Tour Cruiseship Eastern Sunset” (Paley 179). Faith's sardonic reply provides another view of her estranged marriage with Ricardo while also explaining this heroine's romantic bitterness more clearly. The story strolls through various
conversations, eventually involving her son Richard, a third grader who perceives the universe surrounding him with more wisdom than his youth might suggest. He overhears Faith calling another child “‘a peach’” (Paley 180) and accuses her of liking other kids more than her own. Quite feasibly, this resentment sprouts from his anger at Ricardo's abandonment.

Also struggling with the same rejection while confronting her own loneliness, Faith responds narratively by describing her emotional closeness to Richard as a contrast to this marital failure. She recounts how she would often take the ferry to Staten Island or to Hoboken with her child, just the two of them, and the bond they shared. She pointed out the tugboats, explaining differences between rivers and estuaries, because his genius, even at the age of two, stood out with such wonderful clarity to her: “I could tell him scientific things like that, because I considered him absolutely brilliant. See how beautiful the ice is on the river, see the stony palisades, I said, I hugged him, my pussycat, I said, see the interesting world” (Paley 180).

Although Faith mourns her husband's cold-hearted desertion, stung by his public betrayal, she feels an affectionate connection to both of her children, an ability to be her true self. In fact, within Paley's first collection of stories *The Little Disturbances of Man*, she offers a memorable parental moment within a work titled “2 A Subject of Childhood,” the second of a two-story series she names “Two Short Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life.” In this particular piece, Paley illustrates the angry, potentially violent impatience of Clifford, one of Faith's various boyfriends, and the contrasting tenderness shown by her other son Tonto. Not long after Clifford accuses her of lax mothering skills before he swiftly departs for good, Tonto expresses how much he loves Faith. She responds with effusive affection:

I held him so and rocked him. I cradled him. I closed my eyes and leaned on his dark head. But the sun in its course emerged from among the water towers of
downtown office buildings and suddenly shone white and bright in me. Then through the short fat fingers of my son, interred forever, like a black-and-white-barred kind in Alcatraz, my heart lit up in stripes. (Paley 96)

Indeed, Faith experiences a much more powerful attachment to her two sons than she ever achieves from the men who carelessly rotate through her life over the years.

Although Faith displays great affinity with these boys, tensions still exist in the household due to Ricardo's withdrawal, causing Richard, her older son, to express the most anger. He shows his hostility on multiple occasions within the story, proving that Ricardo's escape impacts others in the household, not just Faith. In another narrative aside, after defending herself against Richard's accusation that she cares about other children more than her own, Faith represents her son's great intelligence with unmistakable pride. She expresses her perception of Richard's intellectual superiority among a diverse class of Jews, Presbyterians, and bohemians.

As if he can actually hear this mental report, Richard interrupts Faith's description to ridicule her for the effusive praise, which he labels as “typical yak yak” (Paley 181), and continues to blame his mother for a perceived apathy. This surreal crossover of the story's invisible boundaries occurs so seamlessly that Faith responds without surprise, though irked at the harsh criticism. She justifies her values and articulates the reasoning behind her decision to reside in this particular community. According to Faith’s explanation, the wonderful exposure to different ethnic groups benefits Richard's development. He has the opportunity to interact with and discover other cultures because of a particular sacrifice on Faith’s part:

I could be living in the country, which I love, but I know how hard that is on children – I stay here in this creepy slum, I dwell in soot and slime just so you can meet kids like Arnold Lee and live on this wonderful block with all the Irish and Puerto Ricans, although God knows why there aren't any Negro children for you to play with. (Paley 181)
Due to such defensiveness, Faith temporarily disregards the rich benefits she herself receives by living in this community. Her remarks reflect a complex mixture of self-pity and immaturity that betray her as eager for Richard’s approval rather than as the adult firmly in charge of this relationship. While revealing her parental weaknesses, Faith also indirectly discloses the appeal of her chosen neighborhood, an environment where so many different cultures merge together, enhancing more than just her children’s lives. In essence, she profits from this setting because the inclusive nature of this neighborhood erases any alienation, accepting, even celebrating, differences in an act of unity that discourages withdrawal. Furthermore, though Faith never admits to Richard how her friendships with other like-minded mothers heighten her connection to this particular community, that personal reality binds Paley’s heroine to the area with an unstated joyousness, too.

Paley illustrates that emotional attachments to other women, often similar in their mothering approaches, enable Faith to defeat isolation. A sense of affectionate closeness radiates between this heroine and her friends as Paley interlaces these various women into the story, proceeding with little regard for plot to depict mundane discussions between neighbors. Therefore, an authentic flow of mothers' conversations populates the narrative with lively dialogues that overlap between Mrs. Junius Finn, Lynn Ballard, Anna Kraat, and Kitty Skazka, among others. From her perch, Faith listens in on various snippets, watches Tonto play with Kitty's daughter Antonia by the grass, and considers how Jews have the best insight about God. This freedom to contemplate without constraint reinforces her comfort in this community of mostly working women who, like Faith, also confront romantic and financial challenges. Therefore, Paley’s main protagonist has the ability to think, relate, and observe, never faced with
the pressure to put on a veneer, to fit into a certain mold. Quite simply, she can just be herself. Faith’s delightful capacity to remove any barriers against genuine thought and expression can be traced back to community, an outgrowth of the kind of trust Paley exemplifies in the enduring friendships between mothers in this neighborhood. As Faye S. Wolfe notes, Paley offers “the intimacy between women that grows in kitchens and by swing sets and debates about socialism. Her women are bound together through their talking, through political activity, and the raising of their children” (Wolfe 502). Paley’s depiction of companionship transcends individual desolation through a mutual reliance and an understanding between women. Through these relationships, which blossom from community participation, Paley demonstrates how emotional connectedness can prevail over the tendency to withdraw and, as a result, feel estranged.

Within the dynamic climate of activities that Faith witnesses from her tree branch, where conversations blend together between children, mothers, and passers-by, a single moment brings the sociable air to an immediate halt. A band of four or five people, loudly banging on pots and pans, seizes the attention, stunning everyone into silence. These arrivals are war protesters and their startling signs, which ask, “would you burn a child?” followed by an image of a napalmed Vietnamese baby, dominate the scene, troubling everyone who views this display. While the group of neighborhood mothers and friends erupts into furious conversation at the shock of such a spectacle, Faith's purpose becomes clear in that instant. The story ends with a final short paragraph that describes her evolution:

And I think that is exactly when events turned me around, changing my hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling, Then I met women and men in

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28 Wolfe’s 2008 article titled “Grace Paley’s Stories” provides a unique analysis of the author’s works. In her analysis, Wolfe reveals how she once attended a single class session when Paley taught writing at Sarah Lawrence College. From this context, Wolfe examines Paley’s body of stories. Her comments are especially thoughtful when scrutinizing Paley’s treatment of friendships between women.
different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by children's heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world. (Paley 194)

Right then, Faith draws a significant conclusion that puts her loneliness in perspective, helping her to achieve a purpose and, simultaneously, overcome perpetual self-pity. This recognition is reminiscent of the consciousness she achieves upon learning of childhood friends' assorted crises, putting her own depression into a different, much less despairing context. Indeed, Paley makes the quiet point that looking outside of oneself, of becoming actively involved in a community, can diminish personal alienation. Deborah Heller bolsters this message and states that Paley's story allows Faith to balance “her personal complaints (both her manlessness and her failure to join her neighbors in their progress of upward mobility) with the ebullience of her resilient spirit and the sense of community and family she enjoys” (Heller 80). Faith realizes that by transcending her grievances, the constant discontent from failed attempts to make romantic connections, she can discover a better use for her energy that both benefits others and leaves alienation behind.

Community takes on a different, but no less meaningful function in Paley's next short story, where she examines the nostalgia of Faith's former neighborhood and its capacity to define this heroine's personal history. In “The Long-Distance Runner,” Faith, remarried, slightly out of shape, and navigating middle age, decides out of the blue to dive into this demanding sport:

I wanted to go far and fast, not as fast as bicycles and trains, not as far as Taipei, Hingwen, places like that, islands of the slant-eyed cunt, as sailors in bus stations say when speaking of travel, but round and round the country from the seaside to the bridges, along the old neighborhood streets a couple of times, before old age and urban renewal ended them and me. (Paley 242)

Determined, Faith works hard at building her stamina, trying to run on a variety of landscapes,
from the country to suburban hilly areas. By summertime, Faith feels ready to make a specific journey. Both her sons are older now, involved in their own lives, and appear indifferent to Faith's parting. In the beginning, she runs without stirring anyone's notice, passing landmarks from her childhood along the boardwalk. Once she enters her old neighborhood, though, Faith suddenly finds herself surrounded by hundreds of Black people. They demand to know her identity, mock her weight, and inundate her with questions, which she answers easily. “I used to live here, I said. Oh, yes, they said, in the white old days. That time too bad to last” (Paley 244). Faith shows no surprise and does not act intimidated by their responses, merely pointing to an apartment house where she had lived for her whole life until marriage. Various people speak to her then, some friendlier than others. She replies warmly when a Girl Scout named Cynthia offers to take her inside the building and to the actual apartment where Faith once lived, now occupied by a woman named Mrs. Luddy. Within the narrative, Faith remarks, “In this way I was led into the hallway of the whole house of my childhood” (Paley 246). With a matter-of-fact tone and not expressing any emotion, Faith follows the little girl inside, anticipation underlying her simple statement. Ethan Goffman articulates the magnitude of this moment: “In returning to her home, Faith revisits her past, updates and revises a crucial part of her psyche” (Goffman 202). Upon this entrance, Faith can now restore a part of herself she could not access before her homecoming.

Through Cynthia, Faith gains an important pathway to her old apartment, feeling the joy of this reconnection. Yet the route to this door contains surreal qualities, where Faith's conversation with Cynthia takes unexpectedly emotional turns as if traveling through the darkened tunnel of memory. When Faith finally reaches Mrs. Luddy's door, she reverts to her
own youth with a desperate helplessness. Banging on the door to her past home, screaming to be let inside, Faith calls out for her mother. Mrs. Luddy eventually responds and assumes hustlers are after Faith, a woman she has never met before. Despite the peculiarity of this situation, Mrs. Luddy does not question this urgency and orders her son to hide Faith under his bed. But Faith reassures her then: “Oh that's O.K. I'm fine now, I said, I felt safe and at home” (Paley 249). In this moment, some semblance of reality overcomes Faith, likely inspired by this return to her childhood roots and the security that she feels in that instant. Yet Mrs. Luddy does not accept this answer and asserts that Faith is in her house now, subject to following her directives. So Faith complies, squatting under the son Donald's mattress, which smells like urine. Three weeks pass and Faith lives with Mrs. Luddy as well as her four children. During this time, Faith vacillates between leaving or staying indefinitely. But every time she reaches the door, fear takes over, she cannot actually exit:

There was a sentimental truth that lay beside all that going and not going. It was my house where I'd lived long ago my family life. There was a tile on the bathroom floor that I myself had broken, dropping a hammer on the top of my brother Charles as he stood dreamily shaving, his prick halfway up his undershorts. Astonishment and knowledge first seized me right there. The kitchen was the same. The table was the enameled table common to our class, easy to clean, with wooden undercorners for indigent and old cockroaches that couldn't make it to the kitchen sink. (However, it was not the same table, because I have inherited that one, chips and all). (Paley 250)

While this residence belongs to Mrs. Luddy now, it still holds a dear place in Faith's heart, existing as part of her core identity, a pathway to her past self. Therefore, the emotional attachment outweighs any practical concerns, committing Faith to remain as long as possible, enduring the awkwardness in order to maintain this crucial link.

Over the following weeks, Faith succeeds in developing affectionate bonds with Mrs. Luddy and her children, incorporating herself into their lives with ease. Indeed, as each day
passes, she feels a gratifying closeness to the members of this household, which most likely relates to the home itself rather than the family that resides in Faith's former apartment. Whatever the actual motive, however, Faith enriches the lives of these residents with her warm-hearted concern for them, even though she does intrude by this endless lingering. Yet during the three-week period, Faith provides a caring interest in the family, encouraging Donald in his reading to help him improve his skill. Additionally, Faith provides a sympathetic ear and is an eager listener to Mrs. Luddy. The two women engage in heartfelt conversations about romantic relationships, sex, and maternal lessons, always shared with a nourishing candidness. But then one morning, without warning, Mrs. Luddy announces that Faith must leave: “Time to go lady. This ain't Free Vacation Farm. Time we was by ourself a little” (Paley 255). This sudden rejection startles Faith and causes hurt feelings, but she finds it difficult to be mad at Mrs. Luddy. By now, Faith regards the woman occupying her childhood home with great love and feels an emotional connection to her as well. Having no other choice, though, she departs and makes the trek back to her current residence, which appears to have continued functioning as if Faith had never left. Eventually, Richard and Tonto question Faith as well as Jack, her husband, who reassures her that she can tell him twice about these travels, if she wishes. Despite every effort, however, no one understands Faith's adventure. And while it frustrates her that they cannot appreciate the importance of this journey, she also comprehends the casual bewilderment that her family expresses:

Because it isn't usually so simple. Have you known it to happen much nowadays? A woman inside the steamy energy of middle age runs and runs. She finds the houses and streets where her childhood happened. She lives in them. She learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next. (Paley 258)

In this story's final paragraph, Faith accepts the personal nature and complexity of her passage,
an expedition so intricate that it is difficult to articulate. But she figures out the meaning on her own, realizing that by returning to the past, Faith has gained insight into herself as well as a clearer comprehension of the mystifying world around her. Despite the many uncertainties that occurred in the process of this odyssey, Faith ultimately achieves a feeling of safety, even a peace of mind, by this tangible exploration of her roots. Thus, she appears back in the present restored as well as renewed, ready to tackle middle age without fear of the unknown.

Confrontations with growing older pervade Paley's last story, where she also delves into an intense yearning for affection that blends into a relentless need to engage in the community, all through the perspective of Faith Darwin Asbury. Paley's final collection of short stories Later the Same Day (1985) concludes with a significant piece titled “Listening,” which quietly considers the effects of aging, alienation from loved ones, and looking beyond one's own self to hear the voices of others. It is a fitting end to Faith's musings because this piece offers a magical collision of slice-of-life reality and surreal interactions, an intriguing combination that breaks through traditional story boundaries. The format distinguishes Faith's interactions, which, at first, seem unremarkable, while also providing a memorable look into what it means to be a woman during twentieth-century America. Furthermore, the story situates Faith in her activist mindset more clearly than any of Paley's other pieces that center on this heroine's vantage point. Employing Faith's first-person outlook, the narrative opens with her coming upstairs from a church basement carrying leaflets to distribute. Then Faith proceeds to a deli, where she orders a sandwich and some coffee before sitting alone at one of the empty booths. During this time, she overhears two different conversations from surrounding tables. The narrative provides snippets of these interactions with the unspoken knowledge of Faith's close vicinity. As each dialogue
ends, Faith promptly offers the parties her leaflets, which are received with various degrees of politeness. These exchanges seem disconnected at first until Faith describes a conversation with her husband Jack at breakfast. After sharing the two overheard discussions at the sandwich shop, she reveals to him that one of the men that day happened to be him. He responds irritably to her statement: “Well, he said, I know it was me. You don't have to remind me. I saw you looking at us. I saw you listening. You don't have to tell stories to me in which I'm a character, you know” (Paley 380). Despite the simplicity of this delivery, Paley ascribes Jack with an awareness of his own role as a fictional character, where he chastises the narrator's behavior toward himself in real time. This double function in Faith's life complicates him, a detail that she never acknowledges as it hovers over the story's margins. Furthermore, Jack's criticism angrily jabs at Faith's obvious listening skills, her ability to pay close attention to the happenings around her. But he seems to be the most upset at Faith for only telling him moments about men. He asks why she will not share stories by and about women instead. When Faith admits that those would be too private, he becomes sad, which instigates her own angry response: “Well, Jack, you have your own woman stories. You know, your falling-in-love stories, your French-woman-during-the-Korean-War stories, your magnificent-woman-stories, your beautiful-new-young-wife stories, your political-comrade-though-extremely-beautiful stories” (Paley 381). Clear tensions exist within this relationship, erupting in a defensive explosion of jealousy, a fear of being forgotten in the mix of Jack's past and seemingly vivid romances as just another woman among plenty of others.

At this point, with both of their tempers incited, Jack defuses Faith's resentment with a show of tenderness, attempting to restore the former goodwill between them. The question of having a baby together, an issue discussed in previous stories, weaves into their conversation
then, where Jack asks for Faith's thoughts on the matter. After responding that she has not abandoned the possibility, Jack replies: “So, with the sweetness of old forgiving friendship, he took my hand. My dear, he said, perhaps you only wish that you were young again. So do I” (Paley 381). The idea of youth rises to immense significance here, where the notion of creating a baby together entails maintaining their own vitality rather than the specific desire for another child. To make his argument even clearer, Jack launches into a speech, pleading with Faith to be realistic and philosophical about the miseries imposed upon any child with all the horrendous fears that come with life:

Now listen to me, he said. And we began to address each other slowly and formally as people often do when seriousness impedes ease; some stately dance is required. Listen. Listen, he said. Our old children are just about grown. Why do you want a new child? Haven't we agreed often, haven't we said that it had become noticeable that life is short and sorrowful? Haven't we said the words “gone” and “where”? Haven't we sometimes in the last few years used the word “terrible” and we mean to include in it the word “terror”? Everyone knows this about life. Though of course some fools never stop singing its praises. (Paley 381)

The notion of listening has evolved to an exceptional appeal for understanding, where Jack's voice flows without delineation into the narrative. This subtle formatting conversion occurs gradually in Paley's short fiction, but arrives with a profound power by her final story. She demonstrates how individual voices and listening merge, metamorphosizing as a unified reflection of interpersonal connectedness. Indeed, Jack's appeal for Faith to hear him, to comprehend his concerns about creating another child, synthesize within the text, underscoring a global feel beyond one character's singular perspective.

A quiet feel circulates through this last story, the ability to stop speaking and simply hear what others have to say through the act of simple absorption, so that true, authentic cognizance can happen. As Paley pieces together various fragments of interactions, she permits the story to
wander without any concern for the fulfillment of a certain plot. Instead, she gives Jack and a now grown-up Richard time to bond over coffee and cigarettes, discussing Ricardo's abandonment years earlier. Then Paley randomly skips ahead to the future, where Faith finds herself romantically rejected once again. Jack has relocated to Arizona with the hope of enjoying a final love affair. The shift between these divergent moments mimics life's rhythms and unpredictability, though Faith has an established pattern of desertion, where she must eventually forge ahead alone. On one particular day, she feels especially apart, longing for intimacy as she sits at an intersection and watches a pedestrian walk by: “For reasons of accumulating loneliness I was stirred by his walk, his barest look at a couple of flirty teenage girls; his nice unimportant clothes seemed to be merely a shelter for the naked male person” (Paley 385). The urge to share physical closeness with a man seizes Faith, causing an immediate recognition of her isolated existence. Right then, she turns to her friend Cassie in the passenger seat, who is not acknowledged until this moment, to confirm the stranger's attractiveness. Vaguely, Cassie agrees, but she appears to have another, more important topic to discuss as she unexpectedly asks:

Listen, Faith, why don't you tell my story? You've told everybody's story but mine. I don't even mean my whole story, that's my job. You probably can't. But you've just omitted me from the other stories and I was there [...]Where is Cassie? Where is my life? (Paley 385)

Once again, a character shatters the narrative wall, demonstrating an extraordinary recognition of this unstated existence within the story. In effect, Cassie questions why Faith always denies her voice, despite the fact that she also interacts in this same circle of characters. Throughout these pieces of fiction, Cassie contends, she has been continually connected to Faith, to all of her explored experiences, yet always marginalized for unexplained reasons. Darcy L. Brandel sums
up this marvel by stating: “Coming out of nowhere, appearing only in the last few paragraphs of a nine-page story, Cassie's voice reveals the tendency of Faith's narration to exclude, silence, and ignore” (Brandel 92). The notion that such a phenomenon occurred, where Faith, a woman so conscious of social advocacy, could neglect a longtime friend, makes her decidedly flawed. In the process, though, Paley also depicts this heroine as human, as someone just as guilty of disregarding and neglecting others, however well-intentioned she might seem.

Without offering any concrete explanation, Faith's series of stories concludes with this shocking exchange, a realization that she has failed to listen carefully enough, thereby alienating a loyal friend. The notion that Cassie lingered in the background of multiple stories until nearly this final second opens a new dimension of awareness, cataloging the most profound moments of Faith's experiences with questions of her friend's silent presence. Surprised and ashamed, Faith immediately pulls her car over and begs for Cassie's forgiveness. She exclaims:

I don't understand it either; it's true, though, I know what you mean. It must feel for you like a great absence of yourself. How could I allow it. But it's not me alone, it's them too. I waited for her to say something. Oh, but it is my fault. Oh, but why did you wait so long? How can you forgive me? (Paley 386)

Faith responds to Cassie's accusations quite differently than she does to Jack's complaints concerning a similar surreal treatment, where the characters traverse this story's borders with such easy fluidity. Yet Faith allows Jack's voice to broadcast through these narrative layers of reality, however much he disagrees with his portrayal, while Cassie never has this chance to express herself until the very end. Despite Faith's evident guilt at such an oversight, Cassie refuses to absolve Faith of her responsibility. Rather, she confronts her friend in no uncertain terms:

Forgive you? She laughed. But she reached across the clutch. With her hand she
turned my face to her so my eyes would look into her eyes. You are my friend, I know that, Faith, but I promise you, I won't forgive you, she said. From now on, I'll watch you like a hawk. I do not forgive you. (Paley 386)

Cassie's condemning yet still somehow supportive words bring Faith's last story to a close. Her censure notably intrudes on this narrative and underscores the consequences of not paying close enough attention. Indeed, she embodies alienation's human results, the estrangement that naturally occurs when a voice becomes suppressed and ignored, no matter the circumstances. So Cassie's assertion that she will not forgive Faith insists on the continued necessity to listen and to include, ensuring that all perspectives are embraced in order for a community of any kind to thrive while also preventing individual alienation.

This story embodies an appropriate finale to Paley’s body of work because it demonstrates how easily alienation can become a dominant presence when connections to community are overlooked. To Grace Goodside Paley, building powerful links through a dedicated sense of inclusivity, where all of humanity, regardless of any specific ethnic identity, feels embraced, understood, and heard, remained a profound priority. With her socialist upbringing and subsequent devotion to activist causes, Paley ventured to improve the world through thoughtful attention to local communities and their capacity to bring multiple ethnicities together. She strived to form nurturing, non-violent spaces to supply equal agency to all inhabitants. In fact, Paley stressed the value of neighborhoods, urging people to unite and enhance their own corner of the universe for the sake of mutual connectedness. Through her short stories, speeches, essays, protests, and a constant willingness to voice objections to every kind of mistreatment, Paley never hesitated to encourage community involvement as a weapon against detachment and isolation while also speaking up in the face of injustice. Although she
generated a modest collection of fiction via three anthologies spanning from 1959 to 1985, with various essays and poems published in between, her literary power made a forceful impact that continues to reverberate as a feminist statement defiant against misogyny, violence, and political abuses of any sort. As a result of her own desire to overcome personal estrangement, she generated relatable stories that explore ordinary women's confrontations with loneliness, rejection, and the inclination to connect, illustrating womanhood in ways that had not been represented in American literature before. What's more, Paley entwines a fundamental pride in her own cultural heritage with an underlying awareness that never elevates one religious denomination over another. Indeed, the wide array of Judaic experience woven into her masterful body of short stories, which celebrates Jewish womanhood in all its extraordinary accessibility, heightens Grace Paley to a well-deserved prominence within American literature. Because of this impressive multitude of crucial factors, she merits a revered position as one of the most important Jewish-American women writers of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER FOUR:

CYNTHIA OZICK’S JUDAIC JOURNEY TO COPE WITH HER PERSONAL

ESTRANGEMENT

Rooted in Judaic practice, often rich in didactic description, and transfixed by the desolate effects of exile, Cynthia Ozick’s work routinely challenges conventional notions of Judaism. Furthermore, because of its in-depth explanations and complicated portraits of contemporary Jewish life, where alienation blends into the undercurrent of every narrative, her writing sustains regular criticism that overlooks its ingenuity. The cerebral nature of Ozick’s various publications, which range from mystical fiction with supernatural elements to densely organized academic essays, frequently require a certain Judaic knowledge base that can generate frustration from mainstream readers. Unlike the work of Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, and Grace Paley, Ozick’s work also tends to lack the emotional accessibility and, at times, even the warmth that her peers infuse into their fictional representations. Yet despite the difficulties her texts may pose, Ozick’s intensive collection of short stories, novels, poetry, and essays are the most intellectually ambitious of the Jewish women writers included in this study thus far. As a testament to Ozick’s artistry, notwithstanding judgments about her style, she has earned distinguished praise for her innovation. Because Ozick develops sophisticated literary dimensions of Judaism’s complexities while also shattering the ingrained norms of fiction, her works enjoy prestigious honors that include nominations for the National Book Award as well as
the Pen/Faulkner Award. But beyond these notable recognitions, Ozick’s writing reflects a wondrous delight in peeling back the elaborate, frequently obscure layers of Judaic thought to create meaningful portrayals that articulate the darkness associated with profound cultural isolation.

In fact, Ozick distinguishes herself from other Jewish authors by weaving the extensive integration of Judaism into her writing with scrupulous detail, where enraged despondency reverberates at its core. The complexity of her narratives, which demand significant mental focus from readers, accounts, in part, for the controversial reactions she has received over numerous decades. Yet powerful responses to Ozick are not restricted to her assertions in writing. Despite her petite size and soft-spoken voice, Ozick does not hesitate to provoke when in person, too, especially concerning subject matter related to Judaic thought. In 1978, for instance, she bewildered literary critic Harold Bloom to near speechlessness during an intense discussion about Judaism at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan. Despite a prior agreement with event organizers that neither panelist would bring prepared remarks, Ozick arrived with her own written commentary. She strongly disagreed with Bloom’s assertion that poetry evolved on an agnostic level alone and without any religious influence. In Ozick’s opinion, Bloom’s theory exemplified an unforgivable offense to Jewish tradition as well as to the Second Commandment. Ozick argued her position with a ferocity that shocked the renowned literary critic. When recalling this event to The New York Times contributor Giles Harvey in a 2016 interview, expressed his amazement at Ozick’s aggressive interaction with him. He declared, “This splendid lady sandbagged me” (Harvey 2016).1 Perhaps Ozick’s modest image, which Harvey describes

1 In his 2016 article for The New York Times Magazine titled “Cynthia Ozick’s Long Crusade,” Harvey describes a number of confrontational scenes between the author and her literary contemporaries. Within the context of
as a woman in her fifties with “whitening hair and round spectacles,” offered Bloom a mistaken first impression of his intellectual adversary. He may have initially underestimated Ozick based on the matronly appearance that she projected. But unbeknownst to Bloom, Ozick’s capacity to articulate her perspective had been miscalculated plenty of times before. Due of her continual experience as an outsider, she developed effective strategies over the years for boldly expressing her viewpoints, whether in written or in oral form. Furthermore, by this juncture in Ozick’s personal life and professional writing career, she assembled a considerable amount of Judaic knowledge through her own study, perfectly preparing her for the memorable encounter with Bloom.

Not only does Ozick demonstrate a willingness to engage critics face-to-face but she also insists on a cerebral commitment beyond most mainstream fiction for a richer understanding of her look at cultural alienation. Indeed, a full appreciation of Ozick’s meaningful themes requires concentrated attention. So her style often attracts negative judgment. Since Ozick’s arrival on the literary scene in the 1960s, myriad reviewers have disparaged her distinctive approach to telling stories, where narratives are descriptively dense and Judaic awareness is necessary. For useful insight on this front, Arlene Fish Wilner supplies a thought-provoking synopsis of the varied critical responses attributed to Ozick:

An admirer who has studied her work in detail has called her fictions “uncompromising”, but other critics are less sympathetic to the intensity, allusiveness, and compression of her writing, which may seem fueled by anger and hostility; or to her imagery, which can be shocking, challenging,

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presenting Ozick’s new book at the time named *Critics, Monsters, Fanatics, and Other Literary Essays*, her seventh work of criticism, he offers details about this writer’s willingness to engage in spirited debate with prominent literary figures. In addition to the Bloom interview, Harvey includes corroboration of Ozick’s prowess at this panel discussion through a conversation with *Esquire* fiction editor Gordon Lish. As an editor who had published numerous short stories by Ozick and also as an attendee at the 1978 event, Lish told Harvey: “She beat the crap out of him [...] She cleaned his plow.”
or otherwise disconcerting. One critic finds her narrative voice “unfriendly” and an erudite reviewer, in whose eyes she fares poorly when compared with Philip Roth sees her as “finally too cerebral,” too abstract. (Wilner 571-72)

Wilner’s collection of criticisms provide a useful, yet distorted, indicator of Ozick’s impact on American literature through certain critics’ eyes. While certain observations about Ozick are valid, principally the compact nature of her language and, at times, the scholarly tone, such scrutiny disregards Ozick’s underlying strengths. First and foremost, the rage so often identified by various detractors serves a rudimentary purpose. Ozick champions the Jewish Other and her passionate defense of this societally banished individual exists at the heart of every piece of writing she publishes. The anger she conveys at this injustice is not frivolous and legitimately depicts religious and spiritual alienation with all its palpable unfairness. Built upon a foundation that fiercely supports multiculturalism, rejecting assimilation in every respect, Ozick’s work advocates that ethnic groups have the right to maintain their own traditions without succumbing to mainstream society’s pressure to conform. Therefore, the emotion, recurrent instructional tone, and lengthy descriptions, consistently packed with substantial detail, represent her ongoing, insistent argument for cultural acceptance.

However, Ozick’s writing philosophy, which constitutes her expansive approach to grasping estrangement’s intricate repercussions, reflects certain contradictions. These problematic areas could be used to justify some of the author’s unfavorable critiques. A study of Ozick’s work over many decades, with consideration of her own acknowledgments in essays and

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2 Wilner’s 1998 article titled “Limning ‘The Cannibal Galaxy’: Cynthia Ozick’s Moral Imagination” looks at the complicated contradictions that characterize this author’s work. Through the context of Ozick’s 1983 novel The Cannibal Galaxy, Wilner examines multiple facets that differentiate this Jewish woman writer from her contemporaries. What’s more, she uses an array of conflicts ascribed to Ozick to depict the writer’s powerful strengths. In fact, Wilner discusses how some of the contradictions implicit in Ozick’s writing are either “resolved” (Wilner 596) or lead to enriching philosophical discussions.
interviews, reveals that conflicts are more evident and reinforces this writer’s ambivalent reception. Consequently, to achieve any true understanding and genuine appreciation of Ozick, one must have an open mind about her abundant inconsistencies. One crucial example concerns Ozick’s characterization of herself. While she claims to be a dedicated feminist, Ozick denigrates certain women figures with an apparent harshness radiating derision, even contempt at times, that counters a traditional, woman-oriented position. Although Ozick found a fulfilling marital partnership in her own life, one that endured with evident contentment for more than six decades, her narratives often ridicule women seeking such dedicated commitments. As an example, the work titled “An Education,”\(^3\) which first appeared in the collection *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (1976), follows the journey of graduate student Una Meyer who struggles with social awkwardness. When encountering an overweight female peer reading alone, potentially suffering the same marginalized status, Una feels relieved. She bitterly remarks to herself about how “all the other girls were either paring or comparing – nails or engagement rings as the case may be” (Ozick 194). While her own loneliness prompts this criticism of more well-adjusted women, Una comes across as defensively arrogant in that moment. This same disdainful attitude is projected in Ozick’s 1986 essay titled “Washington Square, 1946.”\(^4\) Additionally, in reflecting back on her first day of college, Ozick integrates a similar reference to the young women around her: “The engaged girls – how many of them there seem to be! – flash their rings and tangle their

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3 This novella is included in Ozick’s *Collected Stories* (2006).

ankles in their long New Look skirts. There is no feminism and no feminists; I am, I think, the only one” (Ozick 282-83). Again, without any genuine knowledge of these women, Ozick draws spiteful conclusions, which feel petty and jealous, absent of the empathy expected from a feminist view. However, Ozick’s male characters never suffer from an equivalent level of narratorial censure. Perhaps Ozick’s less critical view of these men could be one reason she frequently concocts male characters to carry out so many of her stories’ imaginative, unpredictable journeys.

An ironic complexity emerges from Ozick’s gender choices, however, because her most renowned protagonists, enduring complex layers of extreme alienation, are women and these exceptional heroines possess the greatest depth. Furthermore, these particular female characters inspire immense compassion, much more than their male counterparts, in notable struggles to find belonging within a routinely hostile world full of cruel indifference. Both Rosa Lublin from the novella *The Shawl* (1989) and Ruth Puttermesser, featured within various short stories published separately and then pieced together as a novel titled *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997), distinguish themselves as sympathetic, yet complex, embodiments of extreme cultural isolation. Their painful inability to achieve genuine connectedness, where each woman’s Judaic heritage only reinforces constant estrangement and agonizing isolation, elevates them above Ozick’s plethora of male protagonists to a profound degree. Furthermore, even when she appoints a man’s voice to serve as her story’s primary perspective, Ozick frequently contrasts this vantage point with women characters who possess talents and capabilities superior to the hero himself. This phenomenon, where women outshine their counterparts without assuming the work’s
central vantage point, particularly occurs in “The Pagan Rabbi” (1966), “Virility” (1971), “The Dock Witch” (1971), and “Envy; or Yiddish in America” (1971). As a result of these blurred boundaries, certain women characters within Ozick’s body of work capture the spotlight even though their private thoughts are never explored within these narratives. In this way, Ozick can investigate women’s experiences from creative angles, subtly, even unsuspectingly, entwining feminist ideas into her stories without weighing down the prose in a didactic manner.

Although Ozick’s uneven gender treatment might be viewed as erratic by some critics, potentially distracting from her scrutiny of estrangement, she explains this approach with a focused, quite detailed argument. In her 1983 essay titled “Literature and the Politics of Sex: A Dissent,” Ozick objects to the implicit notion that women writers are restricted to exploring a certain viewpoint directly affiliated with their own womanhood. First of all, she argues the writer’s actual gender should not be considered in any way to evaluate the literature itself. To Ozick, creating such divisions generates an immediate and unnecessary bias. These assumptions intrude upon a full appreciation of the work and are unrelated to the quality or message that the author conveys. Ozick states:

There is a human component to literature that does not separate writers by sex, but that – on the contrary – engenders sympathies from sex to sex, from condition to condition, from experience to experience, from like to like, and from unlike to unlike. Literature universalizes. Without disparaging particularity or identity, it universalizes; it does not divide. (Ozick 267)

In other words, Ozick contends that the author’s gender should not factor into an analysis of the story because literature concentrates on human experience as a whole. Therefore, to judge Ozick

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5 This essay is considered one of Ozick’s most famous nonfiction works. It was originally published in her 1983 collection of nonfiction works titled Art & Ardor. This book is Ozick’s first published book of nonfiction. Elaine M. Kauvar subsequently included this essay in her 1996 book A Cynthia Ozick Reader.
as a woman writer, requiring her to fulfill certain functions simply because of her born gender, detracts from the actual piece. In addition, Ozick asserts the independence to create any perspective that she wishes, to be unrestricted by her given gender as a woman:

When I write, I am free. I am, as a writer, whatever I wish to become, I can think of myself into a male, or a female, or a stone, or a raindrop, or a block of wood, or a Tibetan, or the spine of a cactus (Ozick 268)

Ozick feels her writing viewpoint must remain unlimited, may assume any form imaginable, and should not be hindered by her own physical form. This stance might also contribute to understanding why she so often devises male characters as her protagonists. By adopting a man’s point of view for the primary outlook in many of her works, Ozick reinforces her unwavering assertion that she can assume any identity as the author. Equipped with the power to create fictional worlds of her choosing, Ozick maintains the right to conceptualize principal voices into men as she wishes.

Furthermore, she ventures another proclamation related to her defense of male protagonists, thereby releasing herself from certain expectations while upholding her emphasis on cultural estrangement. With an impassioned tone, Ozick entirely objects to the idea of “women writers.” In her view, such a notion generates an artificial and needless division within literature. Viewing a literary work through the context of the author’s gender detracts from as well as marginalizes the artistic expression itself. In fact, using the framework of what she views as a detrimental partition between the sexes, Ozick criticizes the seeming definition of traditional feminism:

More and more, apartness is perceived as the dominant aim, even the chief quality, of feminism. More and more, women are urged to think of themselves in tribal terms, as if anatomy were the same as culture. More and more, artists who are women are
made to feel obliged to deliver a “woman’s art,” as if ten thousand other possibilities, preoccupations, obsessions, were inauthentic for women, or invalid, or, worse yet, lyingly evasive. We grow familiar, currently, with the presumption of a “woman’s photography”; will there eventually arise a women’s entomology, or a women’s astrophysics? Or will only the sciences, in their objective universalism, retain the freedom of the individual mind. unfettered by the *priori* qualification? (Ozick 269-70)

Essentially, Ozick condemns the common perception of feminism, which, while designed to celebrate and highlight women’s achievements in a largely oppressive world, separates female artists from the overall culture. She regards this mindset as destructive because it trains women to believe their contributions only contain a value for their own gender, not for universal society. Such a way of thinking also strengthens the mistaken concept of women as secondary, where their artistic production forever exists as subordinate to the creative works that men originate. Ozick’s grievances against gender divisions in literature share a profound connection to her ferocious opposition to isolating individuals who identify with religions outside the cultural mainstream. In her ideal universe, diversity of any kind should be both acknowledged and welcomed within a healthy society, never suppressed for the purposes of homogenizing a culture at the expense of minority populations. Therefore, embracing women artists’ freedom to traverse beyond conventional gender boundaries signifies an important recognition. It means a conscious acceptance of cultural complexities, which Ozick fervently articulates with her essay’s argument for broadening the notion of feminism.

While she asserts the importance of a genderless identity as a writer, able to explore ethnic exile without restricting the narratorial perspective, Ozick does not assume the same stance about her Judaic background. Instead, she deliberately centralizes this ancestry, even publicizing it within her fiction and essays. Such a move might be deemed as yet another contradiction that degrades the author’s credibility. Bonnie Lyons points out this inherent
inconsistency, where Ozick downplays her gender while always underscoring her Judaic identity. Lyons asks: “Why should a writer who is a Jewish woman insist upon being put into one limited category and reject another?” (Lyons 15). This question is worthy of scrutiny because Lyons’s valid observation could cause Ozick to be seen in a skeptical light. Unfortunately, no definitive answer exists to resolve this troubling dilemma. Ozick has never justified the discrepancy that Lyons identifies. However, Lyons does offer a possible interpretation to clarify and, as a result, resolve Ozick’s actions in a logical manner: “One explanation is that she rejects the category woman writer because it hints at anatomy as destiny, while she accepts the category of Jewish writer as cultural and therefore a matter of conscious choice” (Lyons 15). The distinction that Lyons offers contains potential. Her analysis assigns an unspoken agency to Ozick’s thought process that consistently aligns with the author’s mindset. It makes sense that Ozick wishes to seize control of how her audience views her, where her Jewish roots are elevated far above her actual gender. By minimizing her womanhood and accentuating her religion, Ozick adopts greater independence in generating characters of any gender without judgment while simultaneously heightening the Judaic themes central to her work.

In addition to the numerous complexities that formulate Ozick’s feminist and ethnic identifications, she repeatedly clashes with her devotion to traditional Judaic practices amidst a powerful need to represent spiritual outsiders. Since Judaism is a monotheistic religion, Ozick fervently believes that only God can create. Through this rigid context, Ozick feels artists are prohibited from depicting the world around them because they wrongly assume the power of a

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6 Lyons’s 1987 article titled “Cynthia Ozick as a Jewish Writer” is a very insightful analysis of the author. Lyons looks at Ozick objectively within the context of Judaism, describing her writing strengths, feminist aspects of her approach, and the contradictions that can make her a complex study.
creator. Nevertheless, that restriction never stops Ozick from her obsessive impulse to write. It is a subject she examines not only as an underlying theme entwined in sometimes nuanced configurations throughout a large number of her stories and novels but also as a centerpiece within several of her essays. Over the years, due to her own evolution as a writer and as a self-made scholar of Judaic thought, however, Ozick has softened on this once uncompromising posture that debuted early in her career. Ironically, though, even at the height of her vehemence against artists adopting a position that she theoretically believes God alone should occupy, Ozick continued to express herself in written form, even battling with literary critics. Despite her compulsion to write at any religious cost, she openly wrestled with this theoretical dispute, which offers a fascinating window into her creative development across the span of decades. To add further depth to this particular inconsistency, Ozick’s Jewish heritage is Litvak (Lithuanian), which abides by a more practical, skeptical, and rational belief system. According to The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, Litvaks considered themselves to be “misnagdim,” the Hebrew word for “opponents.” As a whole, they “rejected Hasidic religious enthusiasm and emotionalism and all forms of mystical superstition” (Nadler 2010). Although Ozick personally views herself as a “misnaged,” adopting her family’s Litvak heritage, she weaves Judaic mysticism throughout her stories nonetheless. During a 1985 interview with Elaine M. Kauvar, Ozick speaks quite frankly about the disconnect between her Litvak outlook and her attraction to magical elements, which she weaves into her fiction: “I’m a skeptic. And I come from that Litvak

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7 The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe is an exhaustive website for researchers and educators on this subject. Allan Nadler’s article titled “Litvak” provides a comprehensive explanation of Lithuania’s Jewish population. He explains the Litvaks’ customary characteristics, which involve social withdrawal, a lack of emotion, skepticism, suspiciousness, and intellectualism. He also describes how Polish Jews viewed Litvaks as lacking “an authentic Jewish soul.” This is because Litvaks had the reputation of exemplifying bitterness and negativity.
Litvaks are rationalists. It’s both my personal inheritance and my temperamental being. But as a writer I absolutely wallow in mystery religion” (Kauvar 400). This significant contrast as explained by Ozick adds fascinating layers of meaning to the author’s portrayal of Judaism and it also demonstrates that she does not restrict herself to traditional Judaic portraits. However, the dramatic variance also exacerbates misinterpretations of her Jewish identity and her various writings.

Indeed, Ozick’s complex relationship to feminism and her unresolvable conflicts as a writer with traditional Judaic beliefs encapsulate this author’s tenacious drive to investigate alienation from numerous dimensions. To complicate Ozick even further, unlike the previously mentioned Jewish-American women writers, her path to authorship emerges in a distinctly different fashion. In contrast with Yezierska, Parker, and Paley, who endured various types of problematic obstacles before attaining the focus to develop serious careers as writers, Ozick experienced the advantage of a relatively smooth path to publication. Indeed, the familiar limitations of American womanhood, from misogynistic societal attitudes to the lack of emotional support from romantic partners to entrenched gender roles, were never imposed on Ozick. Happily married for sixty-five years to lawyer Bernard Hallotte until his death in 2017

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8 Kauvar interviewed Ozick in 1985 and in 1993. Particularly within the 1985 piece titled “An Interview with Cynthia Ozick,” Ozick discussed a number of crucial aspects about herself. These areas include her identity as a writer, her upbringing, the complicated relationships that she experienced with each of her parents, and the trauma that continued to haunt her into adulthood from her debilitating experience as a child growing up in the Bronx’s public school system. It is worthwhile to note that Kauvar developed a warm friendship with Ozick, which comes across in the 1985 interview. Kauvar describes a lively debate that occurred between the two of them because Ozick does not like to give interviews. To explain Ozick’s reasoning, Kauvar provides a quote from this author in 1984: "There is . . . a problem intrinsic in an interview. I have long been disturbed by interviews because, though they appear in print and therefore pass for something 'written,' they are merely a transcript of what has been extemporaneously spoken, often with faltering and stumbling...I have a standard of language for print; an interview, which is talk rather than language, by definition falls short of any publication standard.” Kauvar counters in this narrative with her argument, which centers on the immense value of interviews so the critic can understand “how creation comes into being.”
and the mother of daughter Rachel Hallotte, a distinguished scholar in near eastern archaeology who coordinates Jewish Studies at State University of New York, Ozick has enjoyed a stable adulthood with great freedom and the emotional support to write. Once she overcame a childhood of cultural isolation during her secondary school years, Ozick achieved emotional connectedness in large part from imagining stories where Judaic ethnicity prominently functions within the narrative. Furthermore, her personal history and quest to express herself as a published author are intimately entwined, causing the author’s private life and professional aspirations to coalesce in a manner that solidifies her relationship to Judaism. Because of this consolidation, both attributes achieve greater coherence, seamlessly merging to distinguish Ozick from other contemporary Jewish writers. The biographical facets of Ozick’s life cannot be extracted from this author’s commitment to Judaism’s relevance and cultural legitimacy. As a result, her works embody an elaborate, vivid texture that explores complex facets of Judaism. Within each piece, whether fiction or nonfiction, Ozick unifies her own struggle to face personal alienation as a Jew in a Christian society with the undeviating insistence that Judaism deserves recognition from America’s mainstream culture. This remarkable divergence from her peers occurs because Ozick’s writing fuses personal experience with Judaic thought in each narrative, generating a spectacular convergence that meticulously positions religious estrangement at its core. What’s more, one powerful consistency weaves unwaveringly throughout every piece that Ozick has published since her first Judaism-focused collection of short stories in 1971. She is determined to illustrate the utter dejection and tragic circumstances that can occur on an individualized level, which can easily expand to the larger society because of a disdainful view of Judaism.
Much of Ozick’s aspirations, religious inquisitiveness, and avid interest in Judaism, the guiding force toward her eventual fixation on estrangement, can be traced directly to her origins. Born on April 17, 1928 in New York City, Cynthia Shoshana Ozick was the second child of Russian immigrants Celia, who was also known as Shifra, (Regelson) and William Ozick. Both of her parents were raised in the northwest region of Russia and considered themselves Litvak Jews in the Lithuanian Jewish tradition. Due to the czar’s conscription in 1913, William Ozick quickly escaped from Russia to avoid the country’s compulsory draft into the army. With a complete secular and Talmudic education as well as language fluency upon his arrival in America, he opened a pharmacy in New York City’s Yorkville neighborhood, where Ozick was born. Soon after her birth, Ozick moved to the Bronx with her parents and older brother, spending her entire childhood in this location. Both her mother and father were proprietors of the Park View Pharmacy in the Bronx’s Pelham Bay section. While they worked closely side by side each day, sharing the same Judaic belief system, their personalities and life philosophies existed at opposite ends of the spectrum, causing certain conflicts between them. In a 2011 interview with Emma Brockes, Ozick describes the pronounced differences between her parents:

My father was a timid man, my mother was not a violent woman but very open, and sort of a firebrand and distressed by injustices, and my father would say you’re always trying to set the world right. He was constantly charging her with that. If my mother had had her way she would have had a national chain of drugstores from California to Maine. But my father, on the phone, when he would order medications, he would ask for a 12th of a dozen – that’s one. That’s how cautious he was. (Brockes 2011)⁹

According to Brockes, while Ozick recognized the dissimilar natures of her parents, she also

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⁹ Brockes’s 2011 article for The Guardian titled “A life in writing: Cynthia Ozick” supplies some important insights on the author, her childhood, her family, and her work. Ozick answers Brockes questions with candid detail. In addition to delineating the emotional differences between her parents, Ozick gives a context for her father’s own fearfulness. She explains that as a five-year-old in Russia, he experienced the trauma of being trapped in the synagogue with other Jews as a mob threatened to burn down the community’s temple.
viewed aspects of each of them in herself. Generally speaking, however, Ozick felt better understood by her mother because of the emotional bond that they shared alongside a willingness to pursue any ambition regardless of gender. Ozick also identified with her mother’s strength and courage as Diane Cole notes. Cole describes Ozick’s childhood memories of hearing powerful stories about her mother’s distinct bravery during the Regelson family’s escape from Russia. By 1906, Ozick’s grandfather and his three oldest offsprings had arrived in New York and anticipated the rest of the family’s arrival, which included Celia, her brothers Jacob, Abraham, Joseph, and Rubin as well as her mother Rachel. At the age of nine, Celia experienced immense terror and confronted various dangers with her relatives on this unpredictable journey, even enduring an illegal border crossing in Russia. Cole explains that during this passage, family members also encountered individuals who tried to take advantage of their helplessness as frightened immigrants. But Celia Regelson fought back against these threats to ensure the family’s safe entry to America: “It is she who stands up to the Cossack guide who attempts to swindle them and later, when the family finally arrives in America, it is also she who warns her brother how to avoid an inspection that surely would have forced him back from Castle Garden” (Cole 6). According to Cole, Ozick’s mother did not allow the terrifying uncertainties of the family’s circumstances to hinder this crucial voyage. Instead, she displayed resourcefulness and fortitude in order to prevail. As a result, Celia Ozick served as an essential role model for her daughter. Because of her mother’s example, Ozick felt it imperative to articulate her beliefs and

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10 Cole’s 1987 article “The Uncollected Autobiography of Cynthia Ozick” brings together a wide variety of biographical instances to create a portrait of this author. Since Ozick never formally wrote an autobiography and there are no official biographies of this writer either, Cole’s narrative provides a vivid picture of the author’s personal background. For the most part, Cole takes certain excerpts from Ozick’s nonfiction to draw conclusions about the writer’s life.
not stay silent. Indeed, Ozick’s preparedness to oppose formidable critics such as Harold Bloom when she feels strongly about an issue could be viewed as a direct result of her mother’s moral teachings.

In addition to the bravery and great feistiness that Celia Ozick represented, she also did not impose gender limits on or express any discouragement against her daughter’s determination to become a writer. By contrast, William Ozick dismissed his youngest child’s dream, though the future author has conceded that this attitude never indicated a lack of love for her. In her 1985 interview with Kauvar, Ozick explains the distinctly different manners in which each parent viewed her desire to write:

I’ve given some thought to my father. My father loved me; it has nothing to do with the withholding of any caring or love. But I think one of the reasons I felt free to say from earliest childhood that I was going to be a writer is that if I had been a boy, I would have had to go be something else. But it wasn’t important for a girl; it didn’t matter. It couldn’t be taken seriously. It really didn’t matter what I did because I was going to get married and that would be that. So I think that in a way being a girl gave me a kind of freedom to become a writer. My father did finally see that it was serious, that I was in fact possessed. My mother, on the other hand, always knew it was serious. (Kauvar 385-86)

Because of William Ozick’s traditional outlook on women’s roles in society, he assumed that his daughter’s intellectual interests were temporary at best and she would eventually succumb to expected domestic responsibilities. Fortunately for Ozick, her mother and her maternal grandmother Rachel Regelson never inhibited this prospective writer from following her dreams. Despite William Ozick’s inability to understand his daughter’s resolve to become a professional author, though, he offered affectionate care throughout her childhood. But oppressive presumptions, directly derived from his conventional Judaic mindset, interfered in his capacity to see Ozick with the same clarity and open-mindedness that his wife possessed. Perhaps William
Ozick’s own fearful and conservative character also contributed to this initial failure to appreciate his daughter’s intent to fulfill her creative objectives in life. As a testament to his interest in Ozick’s happiness, however, he ultimately understood that writing epitomized much more than simply a passing hobby. Yet many years later, while Ozick immersed herself in writing her first novel *Trust* (1966), he expressed concern that she invested so much time in one endeavor without making visible progress. In the same 1985 interview, Ozick explains her father’s inability to comprehend the writing process. According to Ozick, he felt worried that she was not “publishing anything and having all my eggs in that basket and having no other eggs that were operative” (Kauvar 386). William Ozick’s worry could be viewed in multiple ways. Although Ozick was newly married to a lawyer by the time her father voiced his uneasiness, he may have still felt anxious about the young couple’s financial security at this juncture. Perhaps he would have preferred for Ozick to obtain a job that utilized her recently earned graduate degree in English for additional, concrete income. Writing a book does not garner immediate wages and he might not have comprehended that reality. More likely, though, William Ozick’s remark reflected his ingrained sexism, where “eggs” may have represented the expectation that his daughter begin having children rather than focus on the more abstract endeavor of writing. During her 1985 interview with Kauvar, Ozick characterizes this exchange with her father as “the most hurtful moment of my life” (Kauvar 386). Because of Ozick’s reaction to his attitude toward her work, the latter option contains greater plausibility.

Moreover, Ozick’s anguish reveals the distressing reality that William Ozick could never understand his daughter’s creative drive, perhaps further entrenching and complicating her own ethnic alienation. Sadly, Cynthia Ozick is not the only example of a Jewish woman writer whose
father disapproved of an unorthodox direction prioritizing innovative expression over domestic expectations. Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, and Grace Paley also experienced similar tensions with their own paternal parents. Because of these fathers’ refusal to accept or even attempt to comprehend the hugely powerful impulse of each of the authors to generate meaningful art, the respective relationships suffered in complex ways without satisfying resolutions. This pattern, as seen by the examples of Ozick, Yezierska, Parker, and Paley, indicates the inherent difficulties that women encounter when choosing less conventional paths. Furthermore, it could be said that the additional element of traditional Judaic practice, which tends to treat women as secondary and without genuine agency, worsened these father-daughter frictions even more. As a result, each of the Jewish women authors studied thus far had no choice except to come to terms with the strained relations with their fathers in order to continue striving to achieve their writing aspirations.

Even without both parents’ full support of Ozick’s creative ambition during her childhood, the family business still served as a rich resource to the future author by providing books that alleviated her terrible loneliness. Park View Pharmacy put Ozick in indirect contact with organizers of a traveling library, which regularly toured the community. Through this continued access to books, Ozick developed a love of reading from a very young age and enjoyed entrance to numerous literary worlds that she navigated with great eagerness. Ozick’s intense attraction to literature might also be viewed as part of her family history. Israeli poet Abraham Regelson, Celia Ozick’s brother and winner of a number of prestigious awards for his work, embodied a motivating factor of Cynthia Ozick’s literary interests. In a 1983 interview with Eve Ottenberg, Ozick claims she had a clear knowledge of herself as a writer from the start.
of her consciousness and considered Regelson to be “a kind of spiritual model” (Ottenberg 62).\(^\text{11}\)

In fact, Ozick did follow in her uncle’s publishing footsteps and her reverence for Regelson extended well into her own writing career. When he received a lifetime recognition award from New York University for his contribution to Hebrew letters in 1977, Ozick introduced Regelson at the ceremony with a thoughtful testimonial about him.\(^\text{12}\) Long before Ozick embarked on her own journey as a writer, though, she perceived reading to be a much-needed emotional outlet. This engrossing activity transported her from the extreme loneliness that she doubly experienced in the Judaic and public educational systems.

Throughout her schooling, from the primary and secondary grades to the college level, Ozick silently endured rejection, torment, and painful isolation because of her religious identity. Specifically between the ages of five and thirteen, Ozick remained separate from every other student as the only Jewish child in her classes. Surrounded by kids who represented a wide array of heritages, including Irish, German, Scottish, and Italian, Ozick stood alone. All of her classmates were members of religions evenly distributed between Catholic and Protestant. Unfortunately, Judaism had no visible presence at school or even within her neighborhood,

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\(^{11}\) Ottenberg’s 1983 article for *The New York Times Magazine* titled “The Rich Visions of Cynthia Ozick” includes a detailed interview with the author about her life. Ottenberg also provides analysis of Ozick’s work, describing how the author’s characters often struggle to assert their Judaic roots in a culture that refuses to recognize diverse ethnicities.

\(^{12}\) Ozick’s tribute to Regelson was printed in its entirety within the May 6, 1977 edition of the *Jerusalem Post*. She described her uncle’s decision to emigrate to Israel soon after its declared independence in 1948 and become a translator. To underscore the importance of her uncle’s departure from America to Israel, Ozick states: “You did this because you are an idealist. By now the English language, perhaps in America as nowhere else, has corrupted this fine old word: idealist. Often enough it is used as a term of abuse for someone who does not have his feet on the ground. But you knew – you have always known – what ground you meant to have your feet on: it was the holy ground of Israel, and you did not hesitate to translate the words of immemorial promise into the life of action. So, for the second time, you became an immigrant into a land of promise.” Furthermore, Ozick provided a thoughtful blend of his accomplishments, a family history, and an analysis of his significant contributions to Hebrew literary. She also praised her uncle for his humanism, idealism, and “reverence for person, and place, and life.”
which caused Ozick to feel the constant ache of disconnectedness. She describes this perplexing reality in a letter to Victor Strandberg, a biographer as well as a literary critic who has written comprehensively about the author and her body of work. In this particular correspondence to Strandberg, dated June 6, 1990, Ozick describes her immense anxiety at encountering Christian landmarks that were prominent aspects of her local community:

I was the only Jewish kid...There were two Catholic churches; I was terrified of them both, and was obliged to pass one or the other on the way to school; so with shaking knees, I used to race past on the opposite side of the street. (Strandberg 6)

Ozick’s extreme fear of her neighborhood’s churches reflects the condemning exclusion that she experienced as an outsider. These Christian structures were persistent reminders to Ozick that she did not belong in her own community. Furthermore, Joseph Lowin adds a pivotal dimension to Ozick’s fright by demonstrating that her dread extended far beyond the actual landmarks. He expands upon Ozick’s portrait with a particularly upsetting point that the author herself does not include in her correspondence. Lowin states: “She remembers having stones thrown at her and being called a Christ-killer as she ran past the two churches in her neighborhood” (Lowin 1999). This petrifying incident magnified the young Ozick’s despair over isolation alone to the justifiable worry over physical harm. Therefore, exile’s emotional consequences were exacerbated by the brutal treatment Ozick experienced simply because of her Jewish identity.

In addition to this exclusion and viciousness, perpetual confusion about Judaism only

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13 Strandberg’s 1994 book titled Greek Mind/Jewish Soul: The Conflicted Art of Cynthia Ozick examines the author’s work in the context of her Judaic identity. He specifically focuses on how Ozick’s adherence to Jewish traditions influences the author’s novels, most significant short stories, and a variety of her notable essays.

14 Lowin’s 1999 article titled “Cynthia Ozick” appears in “The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women” as part of the Jewish Women’s Archive website. Lowin provides a comprehensive biography of Ozick that presents multiple dimensions of this author, including her childhood, education, Jewish writings, literary criticism, and themes.
deepened the division between Ozick and her peers. Within that same 1990 letter to Strandberg, she recounts an incident that defines the emotional disconnection she continually encountered with other children. During the second grade, Ozick engaged in conversation with a young girl who had recently moved into her neighborhood from the Midwest. She assigns this child the pseudonym “Jane Jones” and describes how the subject of religion immediately entered their discussion. Responding to Jane Jones’s question about her own religious identification, Ozick replied that she was Jewish. But Jane Jones did not accept that answer, repeatedly asking Ozick whether she belonged to the Protestant or Catholic religion. The conversation fixated on this one point, causing the girls to bounce back and forth in endless circles without ever achieving a resolution. By the end of their discussion, Jane Jones finally declared, “O.K., O.K., you’re Jewish. BUT ARE YOU PROTESTANT OR CATHOLIC? YOU HAVE TO BE ONE OR THE OTHER!” (Strandberg 6). The capitalized words Ozick integrates into her portrayal indicate the heated emotion that developed between these classmates. Jane Jones’s vehemence, her insistence on ignoring Ozick’s straightforward and honest answer, represents the stubborn cultural insensitivity that surrounded this author at every turn. Indeed, this obstinate refusal to recognize Judaism as comparable to Christianity and as an equally valid religion heightened Ozick’s own alienation, prompting extraordinary helplessness as a result.

To elaborate on the author’s severe isolation and vulnerability even further, Strandberg explains the circumstances Ozick bore from a broader cultural level. This additional context illustrates the systemic failure that instigated Ozick’s marginalization. It also supplies an explanation for the stunning dearth of knowledge about Judaism that Ozick regularly confronted as a child:
Primary among these hurts is the ostracism imposed upon the Jewish child by the majority culture. Although New York is, in Ozick’s own words, ‘a city of Jews,’ she was the only Jewish child among her classmates in Public School 71 – a status that could not help but affect any small child profoundly. (Strandberg 6)

Strandberg’s observations offer relevant insight on the hostile climate Ozick braved at school each day. He also shows how Ozick’s childhood misery derived directly from conditions that the future writer could not control. Her religious identity precipitated a terrible separation from other classmates that affected Ozick’s emotional well-being and physical safety, which the public school system never acknowledged nor tried to rectify. Instead, Ozick silently floundered, feeling increased resentment as well as alarm at the massive neglect she could not articulate then. This powerlessness profoundly shaped how Ozick viewed her childhood. What’s more, it contributed to the portrayals of anguished alienation that Ozick carefully constructs as integral themes within her novels and short stories. But these portraits of desolation inspired by her childhood are prominent in Ozick’s nonfiction as well. Many years after struggling through Public School 71’s consistent indifference toward her struggles, Ozick describes this suppressed agony in her 1982 essay titled “Drugstore in Winter.”15 She writes:

In school I am a luckless goosegirl, friendless and forlorn. In P.S. 71 I carry, weighty as a cloak, the ineradicable knowledge of my scandal – I am cross-eyed, dumb, an imbecile at arithmetic; in P.S. 71 I am publicly shamed in Assembly because I am caught not singing Christmas carols; in P.S. 71 I am repeatedly accused of deicide. (Ozick 301-2)

The repetitive nature of Ozick’s phrasing, where she announces the school district by name several times, bolsters her stark accusations against the system that harmed her. Such direct language ensures that no misinterpretation can occur in Ozick’s indictment of P.S. 71’s

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15 Ozick’s essay was first published in *The New York Times Book Review*. A year later in 1983, Ozick included this piece within her collection of literary essays titled *Art & Ardor*. 
devastating failures. Beneath the elegant surface of her poetic wording is the misery of a voiceless child who sustained continued mistreatment. In fact, Ozick portrays herself as a victim of the school district’s villainy. Yet while Ozick openly blames the system for its intolerance, the author also internalizes this unfair rejection. With both anger and irony, she claims to embody the “scandal” of divergence from the other children. Ozick characterizes herself as physically unappealing and intellectually incapable, implying that this antagonism derives from her religious diversity. Indeed, Ozick shows the psychological turmoil that results from cultural oppression, where marginalized, isolated individuals who lack any support feel the ostracization is their fault, even while recognizing the actual obstacle.

Alongside the animosity that Ozick encountered while attending public school, she also experienced rejection in her religious education. At the age of five-and-a-half, her maternal, Russian grandmother Rachel Regelson, who emigrated to America in 1906, had attempted to enroll Ozick in a *cheder*, the term for a Yiddish-Hebrew school. Upon their arrival at this *cheder*, the rabbi scolded Regelson for bringing a young girl to learn about Judaism. Elaine M. Kauvar 

presents this crucial moment from Ozick’s childhood as the motivating force of the author’s feminist outlook. As noted earlier, Ozick’s idea of feminism contains intricacies that may at first appear to contradict the definition of advocacy for women’s rights. However, Ozick understood from an early age that girls and women were viewed as secondary to their male counterparts, including within the Jewish religion. Ozick’s awareness of this reality developed from the moment she witnessed the rabbi’s immediate dismissal of her and Regelson. Due to Ozick’s

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16 Alongside her important interviews of Ozick, Kauvar edited the 1996 book *A Cynthia Ozick Reader*. Within her introduction, Kauvar offers insights on the author’s life and writing career as well as a selection of her works. The pieces Kauvar includes are a sampling of Ozick’s poems, fiction, and essays.
perception of that exchange, Kauvar states the author became actively involved in feminist thought soon after this pivotal experience. In addition to describing the interaction, Kauvar offers a clear sense of the rabbi’s language and translates his Yiddish command into English. In Kauvar’s interpretation, he stated to Regelson: “‘Take her home; a girl doesn’t have to study’” (Kauvar xxviii). Despite his order, Ozick’s grandmother returned the next day and insisted that the child be admitted. To give this episode further insight, Diane Cole observes: “the rabbi relented but, we learn from a variety of uncollected pieces, this was only the first of the future author’s many lessons in the unequal treatment of the sexes” (Cole 8). Both Kauvar and Cole confirm that this incident significantly impacted Ozick’s perspective on women’s rights.

In addition to inspiring her lifelong dedication to feminism, Ozick proved her great aptitude as a student of Judaism, which anticipated the future explorations of Judaic exile within her fiction. Rabbi Meskin, the Hebrew-school teacher who originally rejected Ozick, soon realized that she belonged in his class. According to a 2012 article in Hadassah Magazine, Ozick demonstrated her intellectual superiority from the start. Rahel Musleah describes Ozick’s ability at the cheder and also incorporates the author’s own memories of this era in her childhood:

“Ozick outshone the only other student in the class, a 6-year-old boy. ‘At the end it was such vindication. The rabbi said to my grandmother in Yiddish, ‘goldene kepele’—she has a golden little head’’” (Musleah 2012). This compliment meant a great deal to Ozick as a young girl and it continues to resonate in Ozick’s reflections today. During her 1985 interview with

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17 In her 1987 article titled “The Uncollected Autobiography of Cynthia Ozick,” Cole thoughtfully pieces together the author’s life through insights from published essays. As a result, Cole offers a rich study of Ozick’s personal reflections to gain a more informed understanding of this Jewish woman writer’s works.

18 Musleah’s article titled “Profile: Cynthia Ozick” supplies some intriguing details about the author. From her childhood interest in feminism to her desire to learn all about Judaism to her obsession with words, Musleah offers a detailed portrait that reveals important information about this author.
Kauvar, Ozick explains the relevance of Rabbi Meskin’s comment, particularly in terms of how she regarded her own intellectual capacity. She states:

That was the last time anybody ever told me I was intelligent for my whole school time until I got to high school, and since the praise came from somebody who was an opponent of girls’ education, it was something that I held onto. It was very important to me because the Jewish home side of me was the part that was accepting and thought I was intelligent. But the school side was where I was hopelessly stupid. (Kauvar 385)

Although Ozick had proven herself to be a gifted student, she struggled to obtain this recognition from teachers who understood her aptitude the best. Fortunately, Rabbi Meskin realized his initial error in denying her entry to the religious school. Furthermore, he revised his original assessment of Ozick, which boosted the author’s self-confidence, especially since, in general, he did not believe girls should be educated. While the rabbi’s reversal uplifted Ozick’s belief in herself, it failed to change the sense of dejection that she experienced at P.S. 71.

Just as Ozick established her exceptional ability in Hebrew school, she exhibited similar strengths within the public school, but this evident capacity consistently went unacknowledged, deepening her emotional isolation. Unlike Rabbi Meskin, Ozick’s public school teachers never revised their impressions of her capacity and worth. No matter how much she focused on gaining the skills required in her classes, validating her intelligence at every turn, Ozick felt overlooked and ignored on a continual basis. As a result, she ingested the endless rejection that she absorbed from her teachers. In the same June 6, 1990 letter to Victor Strandberg referenced earlier, Ozick explains the neglect that she endured:

I had no encouragement of any kind in elementary school, [...] where, in fact, I believed I was stupid and wholly incapable, despite the fact that I excelled at reading, grammar, and spelling; these were simply not valued by most of my
Because of this apathy from her teachers, which Ozick could never understand, she carried a devastating wound with her well into adulthood. By the time she spoke with Kauvar in the 1985 interview at the age of fifty-seven, Ozick still expressed immense anguish about her time within this school system: “P.S. 71 left its mark indelibly. I am always unsure. I always really feel like an inadequate dumb person. That’s really essentially what it is, you know, somebody who can’t...you know, dumb” (Kauvar 386). Despite displaying evident talent as a student, Ozick viewed herself through the curiously disinterested eyes of her instructors, unable to amend this damaging opinion.

Though Ozick never implies that her teachers’ continued disregard toward her involved any anti-Semitic attitudes, that interpretation could have been a factor in the instructors’ behavior, further alienating this author. With a near non-existent Judaic population in Ozick’s classes, her cultural differences may have prompted frustration over a potential need to personalize attention among a large number of students rather than empathy. From Ozick’s perspective, the self-doubt instilled in her after this terrible experience affected her overall view of herself. She tells Kauvar about the desolation that tormented her, expanding beyond perpetual discouragement at public school to reinforce her unbearable loneliness: “I disliked school; I was inferior there. And it was very strange to me to have two lives like this: on the school side, where I was almost always the only Jew, and in cheder where I was almost always the only girl” (Kauvar 385). Due to circumstances outside of Ozick’s control, she could never achieve a sense of belonging. Within both of her childhood schools, Ozick lacked emotional connections, which only fostered further and much deeper
estrangement. As a consequence, Ozick matured into her adult years with low self-esteem and an inaccurate view of herself that never quite dissipated despite her professional successes. The impact of this mistreatment from her youth played a large part in Ozick’s drive to write. Years later in a 1987 interview with Tom Teicholz, she describes the idea of vengeance as it relates to overcoming moments of great anguish: “I’ve discussed ‘revenge’ with other writers, and discovered I’m not alone in facing the Medusalike truth that one reason writers write...is out of revenge” (Teicholz 183). Essentially, Ozick’s decision to memorialize her distressing experience in the written word acted as a form of therapy. Although this effort did not completely heal Ozick’s earlier injury, it helped her confront the anguish, thereby documenting its reality while also transforming these incidents into art that a reading audience could appreciate.  

Once Ozick graduated from P.S. 71, advancing to Hunter College High School in New York City, however, she anticipated a better academic experience after enduring years of painful isolation. As Ozick noted to Kauvar, her childhood education in this public school system concluded with the same lack of caring attention that P.S. 71 provided throughout this agonizing period of her life. In fact, Ozick’s teachers refused to encourage her application to Hunter College High School, which required students to take an exam for admittance:

The teachers at P.S. 71 were opposed to my taking the exam. They promised me I wouldn’t make it. I got in by the skin of my teeth and into the bottom class. It was divided into levels A, B, C, and D, and I must have been the last to slide into

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19 Teicholz interviewed Ozick for his 1987 feature of this author in The Paris Review. His article titled “Cynthia Ozick, The Art of Fiction No. 95” offers a thoughtful portrait of this writer with his own reflections of their interaction as well as her candid answers to his questions. He makes some intriguing observations of her demeanor. They contrast quite perceptibly from Giles Harvey’s 2016 portrait in The New York Times Magazine concerning Ozick’s 1978 sparring with Harold Bloom. Teicholz writes: “I had feared that the rigorous intellect evidenced in Cynthia Ozick’s essays and stories would be matched in person by a severe manner. But what is most disarming about Ozick in person is her gentleness, sensitiveness, and directness, which put the visitor at ease. At as great a length as I interviewed Ozick, or more, she later interviewed me, with interest, sympathy, and encouragement.”
the D class because the arithmetic was so hopeless. That school gradually over four years gave me a sense that I wasn’t totally stupid. In that school they told you you were a Hunter girl, a member of an elite, and this began to have an effect. And so gradually I recovered; but I’ve never fully recovered. You never really recover from early futility and worthlessness. (Kauvar 385)

At every opportunity, the school system’s instructors reinforced the notion that Ozick did not belong in Hunter College High School. Yet their campaign to impede her hope for a more favorable environment failed to stop Ozick’s determination to attend. Despite her triumph, however, Ozick continues to struggle with personal insecurities because these early mentors declined to be advocates and show genuine concern for her growth. So that emotionally damaging period in Ozick’s life still haunts the author and continues to undermine her self-confidence to this day.

From 1942 to 1946, Ozick put her anguish aside and took classes at Hunter College High School, immersing herself in classic literature to build a solid premise for her subsequent literary exploration of religious estrangement. Through her study of Latin writers, in particular, Ozick learned about Greek philosophy, defining her perception of how Judaic practice contrasts with pagan beliefs. Eventually, Ozick integrated these distinctions as prominent themes within her own work, where she examines the fundamental differences between a spiritual existence and a more detached, unemotional, even self-interested, universe that chooses the freedom of nature over religious commitment. The Latin authors whom Ozick studied during her high school years demonstrate a clear division between Hellenistic ideas shared by the Greeks and Hebraism, which revolves around Jewish traditions and a loyalty to one supreme deity. Ozick’s captivation with this crucial contrast influenced her own writing to a great degree for years to come, especially concerning the Judaic conventions
woven with intricate care into her narratives. Indeed, Ozick’s knowledge of this complex subject matter also helped shape her viewpoint on the cultural alienation that occurs when minority ethnic groups such as Jews are ostracized from mainstream society due to their differing belief system. Hellenism versus Hebraism represents a critical framework that Ozick builds upon and further develops in both her fiction and essays. However, the distinguishing factors embody more than simple philosophical differences. Dean J. Franco observes that the opposing forces of religious faith and paganism extend beyond the intellectual realm and exemplify an ethical awareness. He points out how this tension exists at the core of Ozick’s writing. Franco states:

The decades-long consistency of Cynthia Ozick’s commitment to Jewish moral concerns and her concomitant iconoclasm in defense of human over material and even aesthetic values has led to a critical consensus that Ozick’s great topic is the dichotomous values of Hebraism and Hellenism. (Franco 57)

Based on Franco’s reading, Ozick’s fascination with these dissimilar standpoints are apparent elements in her work. Therefore, Ozick combined her mastery of Latin authors and her understanding of Judaic customs to formulate a profoundly meaningful component to probe from multiple angles within her body of writing.

Around the same time that Ozick learned of Judaism’s considerable conflicts with Hellenism, she made another discovery that ultimately enabled her authentic exploration of

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20 Franco’s 2008 article “Rereading Cynthia Ozick: Pluralism, Postmodernism, and the Multicultural Encounter” looks closely at the author’s interpretations of Hebraism and Hellenism. He streamlines Ozick’s focus into an examination of the many differences between Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, he delves into Ozick’s passionate belief about the impossibility of assimilation, particularly in terms of Jews allowing their absorption into mainstream American society. In addition, Franco discusses how Ozick assigns morality to the Hebraistic side of the spectrum, whereas the Hellenistic realm epitomizes a materialistic mindset. He views Ozick’s exploration of these areas as more complex than many critics ever acknowledge.
estrangement to blossom. In her 1982 essay titled “The Lesson of the Master,”21 Ozick explains how encountering Henry James’s work opened up new avenues of inspiration. Her vital introduction to James occurred quite innocently when her brother took out a science-fiction anthology from the public library. At the age of seventeen, Ozick fixated on James’s writing once she browsed through this book. James’s novella “The Beast in The Jungle” captured Ozick as no other piece ever had before and she regarded the work as her own personal story. In fact, Ozick describes how the rich experience of reading James transformed her into the author himself. She assesses the years between Hunter College High School and enrollments at different universities, right through her graduate studies, as a period in which Ozick felt possessed by James. This fervent association occurred because Ozick identified so closely with the writer. She explains:

From that time forward, gradually but compellingly – and now I yield my scary confession – I became Henry James. Leaving graduate school at the age of twenty-two, disdaining the Ph.D. as an acquisition surely beneath the concerns of literary seriousness, I was already Henry James. When I say I ‘became’ Henry James, you must understand this: though I was a near-sighted twenty-two-year-old young woman infected with the commonplace intention of writing a novel, I was also the elderly bald-headed Henry James. Even without close examination, you could see the light glancing off my pate; you could see my heavy chin, my watch chain, my walking stick, my tender paunch. (Ozick 275)

Although Ozick writes humorously about her dedication to James during this era of her life, even adding magical elements to illustrate her figurative metamorphosis, James did have a transformational effect on the author. He stimulated her innovation well beyond any other

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21 Ozick first presented this essay at the January 1982 meeting of the Modern Language Association. It describes her awed response to James and the impact this author had on her own authorial development. This essay was later published in the August 12, 1982 issue of The New York Review. Elaine M. Kauvar also includes the essay in her 1996 collection of Ozick’s most pivotal writing titled A Cynthia Ozick Reader (1996).
writer whom she had ever encountered. As a result, James constituted Ozick’s entry into this creative artform, from which she gradually developed her own writing style and focus.

In addition to describing James’s profound impact on her work, Ozick details the most important lesson that she learned from him, indirectly liberating her to bloom beyond his shadow and delve into spiritual isolation. Ozick admits within her essay’s final pages that James signified the ultimate idea of art, which she naively glorified while lacking any awareness of his own potentially difficult path to substantial achievement. Because she could only see the cumulative results of James’s capacity, Ozick did not understand the incremental advances he weathered as a serious artist resolved to reach the polished fulfillment she subsequently admired. To underscore her discovery, Ozick clarifies that the real moral of Henry James is an appreciation of the creative process, a continual desire to grow as a writer through great dedication to this art. Furthermore, Ozick declares the relevance of this message to all who wish to become writers. She explicitly discourages new authors from subjecting themselves to the error that she committed, which involved making unfair, unrealistic comparisons between herself, a young writer in development at the time, to one as seasoned as James. She concludes: “Try for what Henry James at sixty would scorn - just as he scorned the work of his own earliness, and revised it and revised it in the manner of his later pen in that grand chastisement of youth known as the New York Edition. Trying, in youth, for what the Master in his mastery would condemn - that is the only road to modest mastery” (Ozick 278). The education that Ozick articulates is a description of her own eventual understanding of how artistic skill advances within a creative individual and the methodical progress that occurs over a significant period of time. Bonnie Lyons observes Ozick’s emphasis on making
advancements in one’s art instead of only recognizing the finished work itself: “It is Ozick’s repeated validation of process rather than product, of potential, possibility for growth rather than idolatry of the finished work, that is a central theme in her stories and novels” (Lyons 17). Ozick stresses through her eventual realizations about James that artistic accomplishment does not happen instantaneously as she had first assumed. It develops due to disciplined, meticulous devotion as well as a patient determination to succeed.

Long after Ozick’s first introduction to James, she continued this ardent preoccupation with the author, which extended well into her college and graduate years while also serving as a foundation for her future focus on societal displacement. In 1949, she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree with cum laude distinction in English from New York University, still fully enthralled by James’s works. Then in 1951, she obtained a Master of Arts degree from Ohio State University with her thesis titled “Parable in the Later Novels of Henry James.” Ozick describes this intense period in her essay “The Lesson of the Master,” vividly recounting the complex influence of James on her life, where she developed an obsession that monopolized her mental energy. Within these reflections, Ozick notes the beginning stages of a crucial transition while writing her thesis. Because of Ozick’s zealous commitment to studying James, an effort that required exceptional focus and extended periods of tremendous isolation, she started to experience negative effects. Ozick states: “All that while I sat cramped in that black bleak microfilm cell, and all that while I was writing that thesis, James was sinking me and despoiling my youth, and I did not know it” (Ozick 275). Only in looking back at this period can Ozick detect the gradual emotional and physical drain caused by her preoccupation with James. Many more years would pass, however, before she could transcend that massive fixation to become an
author in her own right. The actual progression began upon her graduation from Ohio State University, where Ozick embarked on the next chapter in her life. By 1952, Ozick married Bernard Hallote, who became an attorney for the city of New York, and concentrated on her critical transformation from a graduate student to a serious writer of fiction.

Over nearly the next thirteen and a half years, Ozick devoted her time to writing works reminiscent of Henry James, where she struggled to construct her narrative voice, before developing a focus on cultural exile that distinguishes her work. In the first seven years of this interval, which Ozick later termed an “apprentice” period, she concentrated all of her attention on an elaborate debut manuscript. During a 1982 interview with Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick, Ozick clarifies this self-assigned project:

I was at work on an ambitious ‘philosophical’ (so I privately thought of it) novel called *Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love*. (The title of the latter, over such a long span, became abbreviated, moving from M.P.P.L. to Mipple. An endless suck on that Mippel. When I deserted it to begin *Trust*, which I conceived of as a novella that would take six weeks, I had already written three hundred thousand words). (Rainwater and Scheick 257)\(^2\)

Though Ozick humorously looks back upon this past writing effort, it did occupy a substantial amount of her time and she took the entire process seriously. Ozick never completed the book, but this effort paved the way for her next novel. When she finally abandoned “Mipple,” which,

\(^2\)Rainwater and Scheick’s 1982 article titled “An Interview with Cynthia Ozick” focuses primarily on different aspects of Ozick’s writing process as well as the author’s Judaic views. Rainwater and Scheick’s transcript-style interview elicits some thoughtful responses from this writer. One intriguing reply involves Ozick’s views on mystical traditions. Ozick offers clarity on where she stands concerning magical elements and their relation to Judaism: “I feel much more at home with the mainstream rationalist line of Jews (called mitnagdim, meaning protestant, alluding to their opposition to pneumatism), from which, both temperamentally and ancestrally, I stem. Fiction, however, is the playground of mysticism and magical notions” (Rainwater and Scheick 260). This explanation further distinguishes the two sides of Ozick, which are often in conflict with each other. Her description shows the distinction between Ozick as a traditional Jew and Ozick as an author of fiction. Another interesting fact that comes out in this interview is that Ozick finished writing trust on the same day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated.
by that time, had reached three-hundred-thousand words, Ozick veered to a different idea that she initially viewed as a novella. This work titled *Trust* (1966) tells the story of a young woman’s rejection from an affluent Jewish family and her subsequent journey to find her rebellious father in Europe. Like her first try at writing fiction, however, this second attempt turned into another mammoth manuscript that critics often interpret as a direct tribute to her central hero of American literature. Lawrence S. Friedman observes the significant influence of James on Ozick’s early work: “During her twenties and thirties, literature was Ozick’s religion, its high priest Henry James. And it was in thralldom to the autonomy, even the sanctity, of the Work of Art and to James as its ideal progenitor that *Trust* [...] was born” (Friedman 30).

Mimicking the style and structure that Ozick carefully absorbed from studying James’s fiction, she produced this enormous novel. Earning mixed reviews, *Trust* set the tone for how critics would view Ozick for years to come due to her lengthy descriptions and dense language.

In writing *Trust*, Ozick strove to make a powerful statement about art’s value to the world, seeking a similar literary impact that she admired in James’s body of work while largely avoiding facets of Judaic alienation that distinguished her future narratives. However, as Deborah Heiligman Weiner observes, notable cultural elements are woven into Ozick’s initial piece of fiction, offering important insights that help strengthen an appreciation of this writer. Weiner claims: “*Trust*, Ozick’s first novel, delineates her perception of American culture by tracing a young woman’s search for identity and her place in the framework of that culture. As a piece of literature it is ambitious but long and rambling. Yet it is worthwhile, not only literarily,

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23 Friedman’s 1991 book *Understanding Cynthia Ozick* is one work in an extensive series of analyses of American authors within the umbrella titled *Understanding Contemporary American Literature*, which is published through the *University of South Carolina Press*. Friedman provides a detailed overview of Ozick’s career and then methodically examines her most important works in order of publication.
but also, and more importantly, as a way to understand Ozick and the rest of her work” (Weiner 180). By looking at the themes that Ozick explores in *Trust*, which include a desire for connectedness and the stirrings of Judaic links, a clearer sense of this author’s direction begins to emerge. Ozick simultaneously experimented with different kinds of writing as she advanced in the methodical evolution of her novel. Because of this speculative approach, where she started to publish short stories, poems, and essays, Ozick built strong contacts who helped her reach publication. Eve Ottenberg explains how one of Ozick’s poems in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* attracted the attention of literary agent Theron Raines. In this article for *The New York Times Magazine*, Ottenberg mentions how she spoke with Raines, who explained the discovery of Ozick’s poem: “It had a little flavor of Emily Dickinson. So I wrote to Cynthia, and she sent me some stories. Then one day, about 20 years ago, this guy with a cigar, looking very suspicious of me, showed up with a huge manuscript. That was her husband, Bernie, who I guess was coming by to look me over. And the manuscript was ‘Trust’” (Ottenberg 1983). As a result of Ozick’s determination to get published, where she resourcefully found places that embraced her work, the author succeeded in finding a home for *Trust* at New American Library.

By the time of *Trust*’s publication, Ozick had reached the age of thirty-eight and felt eager to enter her next writing phase, which involved meticulous examinations of Judaic disconnectedness within American society. This significant era of Ozick’s career showcases artistic configurations of her own experience of exile as a marginalized Jew. But to accomplish

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24 Weiner’s 1983 article title “Cynthia Ozick, Pagan vs. Jew (1966-1976)” looks closely at the author’s interpretation of Judaism in America. Interestingly, she focuses a great deal on Ozick’s struggle over writing as a Jew in a Christian world, where Judaism is so marginalized. Weiner also explores Ozick’s conflict with the notion of assuming the role of God as a creator of fiction, which reflects an idolatrous philosophy that this author detests. In the end, Weiner concludes Ozick’s dilemma is one without any real resolution.
this vision while also preserving her energy, Ozick decided to change the format of her writing. In the 1982 interview with Rainwater and Scheick, she describes her strategy going forward from a practical standpoint: “I never again wanted to engage myself in something so long. After such an extended immolation, I needed (it seemed to me then) frequent spurts of immediacy – that is, short stories which could get published right away” (Rainwater and Scheick 257). Based on the prolonged period of time necessary to writing a novel, short stories were a more attractive and less draining alternative. However, Ozick’s subsequent publication titled *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (1971) is not simply an anthology that contrasts with the descriptive enormity of *Trust*. This collection represents virtually an antithesis from Ozick’s debut work of fiction. Interpretations of Judaism, the clash between Greek and Hebrew ways of thought, and the notion of the Jewish artist’s idolatrous hypocrisy are all imaginatively explored within this anthology. Indeed, Ozick’s reliance on Henry James as her muse subsequently fades into oblivion within these stories, which highlight the development of her own voice questioning the Judaic ideas that had captivated the author since her youth. Not only do these stories reflect a more authentic Ozick but they also exhibit her narrative desire to assume any gender in her quest to explore spiritual alienation from numerous angles. Ozick seizes upon this freedom to write stories that embody her chosen vantage points, artfully combining elements of Judaism and cultural desolation with passionate wonder.

All of the stories from Ozick’s first collection are told from various male protagonists’ perspectives and confront some form of estrangment, often interlacing Jewish identity into these narratives. Even though these pieces centralize men’s viewpoints, Ozick incorporates powerful women characters into the plots, particularly with “The Pagan Rabbi,” first published within *The
in 1966.²⁵ Essentially, women drive and, to some degree, even dominate both stories despite the fact that a man’s outlook exclusively articulates the events that unfold. This collection’s principal story, “The Pagan Rabbi,” initiates that complex structure by implying women’s great capacity to prevail, despite traumatic conditions, in a coldly patriarchal world. Through the tragic tale of Isaac Kornfeld, Ozick explores the downfall of a once well-respected, up-and-coming rabbi who meets a violent demise. His childhood friend, an unnamed narrator, relates the circumstances while coping with his own shock at Isaac’s mystifying decision to kill himself. Written completely in the first-person, Ozick begins this story with the narrator expressing his troubled surprise at Isaac’s recent death: “When I heard that Isaac Kornfeld, a man of piety and brains, had hanged himself in the public park, I put a token in the subway stile and journeyed out to see the tree” (Ozick 1). In the process of his travels to this haunting location, the narrator reflects upon the friendship he once shared with Isaac, explaining how they had been peers in the rabbinical seminary while their fathers were enemies who constantly competed with each other. Of the two friends, Isaac flourished at school and distinguished himself while the narrator eventually decided to leave, adopting a cynical stance toward Judaism to his father’s profound disappointment. Ozick frames a distinct opposition between the two friends, where Isaac represents great devotion to Judaic belief and the narrator, gradually drawn more to philosophical ideas, veers toward atheism instead. However, the author complicates this division through her narrator’s assertion that he departed from the seminary because he lacked talent, not because he had rejected God. In the storyteller’s view, which serves to obscure these

²⁵ This novella is included in Ozick’s Collected Stories (2006).
distinct lines, Isaac demonstrated the innate capacity to become a renowned rabbi, whereas the narrator himself did not possess that same skill.

This distinct binary between the narrator and Isaac symbolizes much more than an explicit divergence in the two men’s characters, which contextualizes Rabbi Kornfeld’s incremental estrangement from Judaism. It epitomizes Ozick’s personal struggle to cope with the complicated contradictions that trouble her as an artist and as a practicing Jew. To address this internal clash, she formulates a story that uses opposing ideas as a foundation. Indeed, Ozick delineates the borders that separate the idolatrous act of assuming the role of God as a creator versus the obedience to follow each doctrine of the Jewish faith. Deborah Heiligman Weiner observes how “The Pagan Rabbi” embodies the essence of Ozick’s inner conflict:

Ozick’s overt preoccupation is the nature of the modern world and the quality of Jewish life in America. Underlying this problem of being a writer (read Pagan) and a Jew (the best possible Jew one can be – and what does that mean?). As is clearly illustrated in “The Pagan Rabbi,” Ozick sees the world divided in two, that is, with opposing forces pulling at each individual. Whether she terms it Nature versus History, Paganism versus Judaism, Pan versus Moses, or Magic versus Religion, she is talking about the same thing: the pull on the one hand of the easy life, and the pull on the other of order, sense and clarification. The easy life is nature and magic, admiring the sunset, running barefoot in a meadow, falling in love with the mystery of the sea. The life of clarification demands attention to history, and for the Jew, observance of the mitzvot. This is a life not given, but made, not with ease, but with difficulty. (Weiner 179)

Ozick engages incompatible opposites in this novella. She demonstrates angst as an author compelled to apply her imagination to the world she sees alongside a profound loyalty to traditional Jewish values. In general, such Judaic principles are defined as “mitzvot,” which represent the commandments attributed to God in the Torah. According to Weiner’s explanation, which encompasses both generic cultural realities and the most holy features of Judaism, these extremes appear simplistic, virtually the exact opposites of each other. But the opposing ideas
that Ozick weaves into this story epitomize complicated concepts with no actual resolution. While she submerges this irresolvable conflict beneath the story’s surface, never directly imposing such incongruity into her text, its implications are an incessant theme as the rabbi himself endures a similar, immensely tragic struggle to determine his authentic identity.

Once the narrator reaches Isaac’s chosen tree, which stands nearly alone in a meadow, he feels immediate emotion and is seized by the desolation his former schoolmate experienced during the last moments of life. The tree itself looks much like a photograph, but not simply because of its logical resemblance to the newspaper photo that the narrator has in his pocket. As he compares this picture to the actual tree, the narrator fixates on the caption, which references the rope Isaac used to facilitate his death. This detail shocks the narrator because he realizes then that Isaac utilized his own prayer shawl to complete the grisly task of asphyxiating himself. While the newspaper apparently does not recognize the blasphemous nature of using this sacred cloth for such a purpose, the narrator feels mortified. Not only did Isaac commit a sin against Judaism in ending his life but he also selected a holy garment to facilitate this immoral act. By contrast, Janet L. Cooper does not view Isaac’s decision to hang himself with this sacred cloth in terms of its sinfulness. Instead, she interprets this act as indicative of the rabbi’s inability to choose between his loyalty to Judaic tradition and his love of nature. Therefore, he combines a holy piece of cloth and a typical product of nature together for his demise. Cooper states:

Kornfeld is horrified by the sight of his nature-spurning, Torah-reading soul, who shows him that he cannot worship both nature and the word; he must choose one or the other. Moreover, because of Kornfeld’s successful attempt to separate himself from his soul, he will lie in his grave alone and his soul will forever “walk here alone...in my garden” [...] Distraught, Kornfeld commits suicide by hanging himself from a tree with his prayer shawl. Ironically, nature and religion have
joined to take him from this world into the next. (Cooper 185-86)

Cooper’s theory provides Kornfeld with unexpected agency, a defiance against Judaic teachings that demonstrates the rabbi’s embrace of nature, even at the expense of his soul. Ironically, because the narrator has his own religious doubts, he identifies with the newspaper’s picture. At the same time, though, it terrifies him and he repudiates Isaac’s final decision: “It seemed to me I was a man in a photograph standing next to a grey blur of tree. I would stand through eternity beside Isaac’s guilt if I did not run, so I ran that night to Sheindel herself” (Ozick 3). The story’s speaker feels a shared consciousness with Isaac, seeing himself in the stark image that depicts his friend’s concluding minutes alive as if complicit in this irreverent deed. Although he chose a much different direction, leaving the prospect of Judaic leadership for a secular path, the narrator’s residual culpability translates into distorted notions that he somehow participated in Isaac’s impious choice, prompting self-reproach.

Because of this overwhelming yet unwarranted guilt, where the narrator experiences Isaac’s alienation through his own life decision to reject a religious existence, he rushes to his friend’s wife for comfort. In contrast to Isaac as well as to the narrator, Sheindel epitomizes a forceful confidence and an understanding of herself that sharply distinguishes her within Ozick’s story. Though Sheindel agrees to a submissive role as a traditional rabbi’s spouse, which the narrator reflects upon through flashbacks of his brief interactions with her over the years, Isaac’s wife possesses an immense emotional strength that neither man ever acquires. Ozick delineates Sheindel’s character through a conversation between Isaac and the narrator, where the rabbi

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26 Cooper’s 2000 article titled “Triangles of History and the Slippery Slope of Jewish American Identity in Two Stories by Cynthia Ozick” examines the exploration of self-knowledge and the imaginative revisioning of history in Ozick’s “The Pagan Rabbi” and “Envy; or Yiddish in America.”
provides important information to his friend. In a flashback to Isaac’s wedding, Ozick explains the ordeal Sheindel withstood during the Holocaust:

Her birth was in a concentration camp, and they were about to throw her against the electrified fence when an army mobbed the gate; the current vanished from the terrible wires, and she had nothing to show for it afterwards but a mark on her cheek like an asterisk, cut by a barb. The asterisk pointed to certain dry footnotes: she had no mother to show, she had no father to show, but she had, extraordinarily, God to show – she was known to be, for her age and sex, astonishingly learned. She was only seventeen. (Ozick 4)

The horrendous torment that Sheindel endured as a youth because of her Judaic identity puts the religious angst that both Isaac and the narrator experience in a whole other light. Ozick’s startling description of Sheindel’s adversity makes both men appear self-indulgent in comparison. Though Isaac’s reasoning for his suicide has not been addressed as of yet, Sheindel’s terror and the subsequent absence of any familial connections at such a young age instantly elevate her suffering far above the rabbi’s apparent anguish. Furthermore, her educational achievements seem almost secondary in the narrator’s account since no other mention is made. But the portrait of Sheindel reveals her to be a very capable person equipped with intellectual skills and the mental strength to persevere through grueling circumstances.

The narrator’s immunity to oppression numbs him, to some extent, from substantially recognizing Sheindel’s endurance to overcome extreme violence and find a new family. This entitlement causes the storyteller to focus more time on explaining how his path diverged from Isaac’s, who became a respected rabbi, teacher, and writer while having seven daughters with Sheindel. Meanwhile, the narrator divorced his Gentile wife and experienced financial uncertainty for a period of time before settling down to operate a small, basement bookstore. Their paths crossed again when Isaac started ordering particular titles from the narrator, only
deepening his old friend’s curiosity about the rabbi’s ultimate self-destruction. In his own grief and alarm, he rushes to Sheindel’s home uninvited to understand his friend’s fate. Sheindel offers him unexpected insight, which not only reveals Isaac’s inner turmoil over Judaic thought and nature but also demonstrates her own proven fervor to persist. As Sheindel explains details of their life together, bitterness and anger come across in her words. She portrays Isaac as a timid, unsure man who failed to look after his young family due to distractions and desires that made no sense to her:

He insisted on picnics. Each time we went farther and farther into the country. It was madness. Isaac never trouble[d] to learn to drive a car, and there was always a clumsiness of baskets to carry and a clutter of buses and trains and seven exhausted wild girls. And he would look for special places – we couldn’t settle just here or there, there had to be a brook or such-and-such a slope or else a little grove. And then, though he said it was all for the children’s pleasure, he would leave them and go off alone and never come back until sunset, when everything was spilled and the air freezing and the babies crying. (Ozick 9)

In addition to divulging hints of Isaac’s troubled mental state, Sheindel offers a portrait of her own helplessness at her husband’s growing obsession with nature. She could not understand why he fixated on exploring the country and felt alarmed at his repeated abandonment. Additionally, she tells the narrator about how Isaac started to write his disturbed thoughts in different notebooks and her own struggle to make sense of this unraveling. An inability to sleep and a refusal to have any plants around the house anymore, which remind her of “little trees” (Ozick 11), are just some of the effects of Sheindel’s grief.

When the narrator first meets with Sheindel, he feels skeptical of her criticism of Isaac and defends his friend rather than even attempting to comprehend her loneliness and despair. With her permission, he reviews Isaac’s journals and returns to her home days later in an attempt for the two to make sense out of these written ramblings. Through emotional dialogue, he presses
Sheindel for a logical explanation to justify his friend’s decision to stray from Judaism. The fact that Isaac would drift to the park by himself suggested an affair to this narrator, but Sheindel disagrees because the answer is so much more complicated than such a simplistic determination. Ozick discloses Isaac’s descent into insanity through excerpts from his journals, which the narrator recounts with unease. It becomes evident that Rabbi Kornfeld couldn’t reconcile his commitment to a monotheistic religion when he actually felt drawn to the natural world and its more fluid belief structure. In one of Isaac’s passages, the rabbi reflects with distressed eagerness on what he views as humanity’s tragedy:

All that we unfortunates must resort to through science, art, philosophy, religion, all our imaginings and tormented strivings, all our meditations and vain questionings, all! – are expressed naturally and rightly in the beasts, the plants, the rivers, the stones. The reason is simple, it is our tragedy: our soul is included in us, it inhabits us, we contain it, when we seek our soul we must seek in ourselves. To see the soul, to confront it – this is divine wisdom. Yet how can we see into our dark selves? With the other races of being it is differently ordered. The soul of the plant does not reside in the chlorophyll, it may roam if it wishes, it may choose whatever form or shape it pleases. Hence the other breeds, being largely free of their soul and able to witness it, can live in peace. To see one’s soul is to know all, to know all is to own the peace our philosophies futilely envisage. Earth displays two categories of soul: the free and the indwelling, We human ones are cursed with the indwelling – (Ozick 15-16)

Isaac’s thoughts appear unhinged, as if he had reached a mental break that somehow shattered his link to reality. The impassioned tone he projects conceals Isaac’s logic at first. But upon closer inspection, Isaac speaks rationally about his objection to human-made restrictions that the natural environment does not impose. Indirectly, he views himself as a hypocrite for adhering to religious practice, which contradicts the total freedom that nature provides. To be sure, Isaac rails against the containment of Judaism, where his soul must remain isolated and apart, unable to interact with the invigorating liberty that even a simple plant can enjoy. The narrator eventually feels swayed by Isaac’s rationale and wonders to himself about his soul’s fate: “I
began to speculate about my own body after I was dead – whether the soul would be set free immediately after the departure of life or whether only gradually as decomposition preceded and more and more of the indwelling soul was released to freedom” (Ozick 19). Perhaps as someone already predisposed to questioning Judaic conventions, the narrator is open to Isaac’s revised spiritual theories. The paganism that Rabbi Kornfeld explores does not insult this storyteller’s notion of Judaism, but offers intriguing alternatives.

Yet as the narrator reads further into Isaac’s reflections, a disturbing detachment from reality becomes dreadfully clear, where the rabbi’s longing for an emotional connection with nature signifies his own mental deterioration. It is here where Ozick entwines mystical elements through personifying nature into the form of a dryad whom Isaac refers to as Iripomonoeia. This nymph, a sexualized being who communicates through mental means, enraptures the rabbi, totally removing him from the rational world and, as a result, shocking his childhood friend. The narrator includes an excerpt from Isaac’s contemplations, which previews his passionate intercourse with a tree he imagines to be the tantalizing nymph:

Creature, the thought that took hold of me was this: if only I could couple with one of the free souls, the strength of the connection would likely wrest my own soul from my body – seize it, as if by a tongs, draw it out, so to say, to its own freedom. The intensity and force of my desire to capture one of these beings now became prodigious. I avoided my wife – (Ozick 20)

By this juncture, Isaac had released all loyalty to Judaism, repudiating his religious identity. He yearned to merge his unleashed soul with the tempting dryad, finally achieving the elusive connection that did not appear to exist with his spouse. The abrupt end to this passage occurs because the narrator cannot bear to read his friend’s narrative aloud any further in Sheindel’s presence because of the suggestion of disloyalty that Isaac expresses. But the storyteller
eventually returns to his friend’s prose, which proceeds to outline Isaac’s consummation with Iripomonoeia in the public park. Throughout this reading, Sheindel remains stoic, unswayed by her husband’s fervor and the instability his descriptions portray. By the end, she is adamant about Isaac’s betrayal of Judaic custom, though never mentioning his faithlessness toward her. While the narrator views his friend with pity, Sheindel labels Isaac a pagan, deriding him as ‘An illusion’ (Ozick 28). To her, Rabbi Kornfeld’s disconnection from God warrants her own emotional separation from him because of his failure to embody the Judaic values he once claimed to represent. Janet L. Cooper sees Sheindel’s unshakable conclusion about her husband’s betrayal of Judaism as the antithesis of Isaac:

In her opinion, Judaic biblical laws and tradition are sacred and unchangeable, and Kornfeld’s presumptuousness in altering them makes him a pagan. Her concrete and unwavering declarations provide a foil for her husband’s quavering and uncertain struggle to integrate both Hellenic and Hebraic parts of his identity. (Cooper 185)

Layers of complexity exist in the binaries that Ozick generates within this novella. In addition to the fact that Sheindel and Isaac are apparent opposites of each other concerning the realm of Judaic tradition, incompatible contrasts flutter within the rabbi himself. He represents a contradiction because of his own internal strain between the classic Hellenic and Hebraic aspects that so fascinate Ozick.

Unlike Sheindel, the narrator refuses to draw such a definitive conclusion about his friend, choosing pity and compassion for the rabbi’s tragic self-destruction, feeling for his religious detachment. Yet in his disagreement with Sheindel’s explicit dismissal of Isaac, the narrator departs and feels morally superior, never considering that this widow deserves compassion for her suffering, too. But once the narrator arrives at his own home, he copies Sheindel’s impulse and also drops his own house plants into the toilet, thereby echoing her act of
repudiation. Dean J. Franco regards the narrator’s decision to flush his plants away as emblematic of stringent Judaic and pagan differences. He states: “As the story notes in closing, the plants journey through the sewers to the small bay cradling the park where Isaac died, where they will find good company with Isaac’s former consort” (Franco 76). In other words, these plants, natural relatives of the tree Isaac used to enable his suicide, represent nature, the symbolic opposite of Judaic faith. Through the extermination of this greenery, both the narrator and Sheindel cleanse their personal spaces of pagan thought, though each sees Judaism from quite different vantage points as well. Janet Handler Burstein offers a startling insight of this final moment, eloquently linking the sorrowful separateness of each of the three characters to Ozick’s own battle between creating art and abiding by traditional Judaic thought. She notes: “Close reading of this story, then, discloses not only Ozick’s familiar anxieties about imaginative freedom, but also her awareness that life may turn bitter, cold, and sterile in its absence” (Burstein 92). Burstein’s observation renders another complicated dimension to Ozick’s continual tension between art and Judaic principles. She points out that even if the act of creating contains sacrilegious implications according to conventional Judaic beliefs, it, nevertheless, enriches the experience of being alive.

Through a narrator dealing with immense grief over his friend’s sudden death and Rabbi Kornfeld’s increasingly manic journals, Ozick provides a complex portrait of alienation that builds to reveal a complicated landscape of Judaic doubts within a secular world. Yet the division that Ozick explores, where she positions religion and nature against each other,

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27 Burstein’s 1987 article titled “Cynthia Ozick and the Transgressions of Art” delves into Ozick’s complex conflict between her religious loyalty to Judaism and her compulsive need to write. Burstein offers an in-depth study of Ozick’s struggle to live a life of faith while also examining the world that surrounds her.
transcends Isaac’s misery to create a reverberating effect on those closest to him, too, but in markedly different ways. The narrator expends much of the story managing his grief with justifications and denial, hesitating to acknowledge the truth about his heretical friend until just before the novella’s conclusion. Sheindel, on the other hand, has the ability to face facts, no matter how agonizing. She is the only character who never falters in her judgment of Isaac after his death. Classifying him as a pagan, Sheindel remains the sole figure to pinpoint this reality and accepts, however angrily, her lonesome path ahead. In the midst of Sheindel’s emotional estrangement exists Isaac’s desolation and gruesome fall from grace, where religious disillusionment compels him to seek out nature as his only escape.

In Ozick’s next collection titled *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (1976), where she also employs some male protagonists as the primary storytellers, painful estrangement shifts from the religious realm to more cultural complexities that relate to Judaism. With this series of tales, she has fully transitioned from an author intent on emulating Henry James’s style and subject matter to a writer dedicated to the intricate fusion of Judaic themes in her descriptive narratives. The principal story of this anthology, “Bloodshed,” focuses almost entirely on three men who are distinct from each other in most every way despite sharing Jewish identities, each struggling with his own version of anguished estrangement. Jules Bleilip, a nonpracticing-attorney-turned-fundraiser, assumes the novella’s perspective, which follows his journey out of New York to visit his cousin Toby and her husband Yussel. The couple lives in a Hasidic town occupied only by traditional Jews. Without exception, the residents strictly adhere to a way of life which embraces Orthodox principles. Using a third-person narration, Ozick depicts Bleilip’s

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28 This novella is included in Ozick’s *Collected Stories* (2006).
immobilized culture shock while navigating a community that feels reminiscent of a long-ago era in Eastern Europe. When Toby and Yussel welcome him from his taxi, Bleilip cannot believe his cousin’s dramatic transformation from the modern woman he once knew into someone he views as a peasant with her long dress and bandana, which covers a hairpiece shaped into a bun.

Tensions immediately arise once they enter the house, which is in an unfinished state. Bleilip, unsure of how to interact with the pair, worries about not wearing a yamulke in their home, wonders whether he must recite a blessing when served orange juice, and searches for polite words to respond to them in conversation. Instantly defensive, Yussel slices through the strained atmosphere at one point and states without any prompting: “‘You live your life and I’ll live mine, do what you like’” (Ozick 323). The emotional distance that Yussel instills between them hurts Bleilip’s feelings. However, Janet Handler Burstein observes that Bleilip’s problems arise not from emotions, but due to his own inability to discern the realities around him. She claims: “Because Bleilip sees his cousins through a cloud of sentimental associations, he can neither perceive them as they are nor recognize his own negative feelings about them. He will end his visit confused, unenlightened, a virtual prisoner of his own projections and misconceptions” (Handler 93). This blindness is a reflection of Bleilip’s own limitations since he lacks the capacity to be honest with himself and acknowledge the reality before him.

Furthermore, since Bleilip views his own Jewishness from more of a cultural context, he cannot fathom Yussel’s religious choices, which seem extreme, even a source of division. Yet Bleilip craves a meaningful connection with his cousin’s husband: “Bleilip believed in instant rapport and yearned for closeness – he wanted to be close, close. But Yussel was impersonal, a guide, he froze Bleilip’s vision” (Ozick 323). The fact that he feels such longing for the approval
of a virtual stranger suggests an emptiness reverberates within him. This theory earns further credence in an exchange with Toby when Bleilip reminds his cousin of her past aspirations, somewhat of a joke at the time, telling Yussel that she had once imagined becoming the first woman president of America. At this juncture, Bleilip directly questions if she likes the life she has chosen, which causes Toby to shift the same probing inquiry back to him. Surprised, he reflects then, mentally attempting to justify his own decisions in protest form: “Bleilip liked his life, he liked it excessively. He felt he was part of society-at-large. He told her, without understanding why he was saying such a thing, ‘Here there’s nothing to mock at, no jokes’” (Ozick 324). An inability to understand himself comes through his confused contemplations. The superlatives that Bleilip selects to describe his contentment are quite opposed to the craving he feels for Yussel’s friendship. Complicated conflicts, which erupt in the uneasy conversations with Bleilip and his hosts as well as his own inner uncertainties, lay the groundwork for the confrontation to come.

As the novella progresses, Ozick further defines Bleilip’s and Yussel’s disparate Judaic identities and the private struggles that each man endures concerning faith. While Bleilip sees himself as an assimilated, skeptical Jew, a mitnagid without religious affiliation who identifies with New York’s corporate world, Yussel, a Holocaust survivor, silently copes with his own rage while dedicating his existence to Judaic prayer and study. Yussel’s oppressive views of womanhood stun Bleilip. He cannot reconcile witnessing Toby, a college-educated woman, acquiesce to domestic duties alone as she takes care of the couple’s two sons, fashioned in an Orthodox mold with their earlocks, while Yussel attends services. But Yussel is unapologetic about the family’s lifestyle and anticipates Bleilip’s criticisms, even though they remain
unspoken. He bluntly asserts that Toby has made her choices and he did not move to this community with any expectations of women’s rights. Once again, Bleilip feels distressed at Yussel’s brusque behavior because he hungers for this man’s emotional understanding:

Bleilip said nothing. This was not the sort of closeness he coveted – he shunned being seen into. His intention was to be a benefactor of the feelings. He glimpsed Yussel’s tattoo-number (it almost seemed as if Yussel just then lifted his wrist to display it) without the compassion he had schemed for it. He had come to see a town of dead men. It spoiled Bleilip’s mood that Yussel understood this. (Ozick 325)

Like Yussel, Bleilip also possesses defensive tendencies, squirming at the thought of being judged, though he conceals these insecurities beneath criticisms of this parochial Jewish community. Privately considering the Hasidic to be a cult, disapproving of what he calls “deviants,” Bleilip still wants to forge a bond with his cousin’s husband to fill an apparent void. Yussel’s ability to perceive Bleilip more clearly than the protagonist can himself alongside his abrupt comments only worsen the visitor’s desolation. Stoic, straightforward, and uninterested in pity, Yussel presents himself without fanfare, openly exhibiting his tattooed wrist as a reality of his past. He shows no motivation in developing an intimate bond with his relative by marriage and keeps his devotion to Judaic tradition private.

However, Yussel invites his guest to attend services with him and meet the town’s rebbe (the Hassidic term for “rabbi”), thus initiating an opportunity for connection. Upon entering the chapel, Bleilip is surprised at how all of the men look his own age, not ancient as he had imagined. Mostly in their forties, bearded and wearing yamulkes or tall hats, they have a shared understanding as they chant and pray, which strikes Bleilip who observes as an outsider. It does not take long before discomfort seizes him. He only understands some words and quickly feels lost, ashamed about not measuring up to the religious commitment these men represent:
Bleilip himself was a month short of forty-two, but next to these pious men he felt like a boy; even his shoulder blades weakened and thinned. He made himself concentrate: he heard azazel, and he heard kohen gadol, they were knitting something up, mixing strands of holy tongue with Yiddish. The noise of Yiddish in his ear enfeebled him still more, like Titus’s fly – it was not an everyday language with him, except to make cracks with, jokes, gags...His dead grandfather hung from the ceiling on a rope. Wrong, mistaken, impossible, uncharacteristic of his grandfather! – who died old and safe in a Bronx bed, mischief-maker, eager aged imp. The imp came to life and swung over Bleilip’s black corner. Here ghosts sat as if already in the World-to-Come, explicating Scripture. Or whatever. Who knew? (Ozick 327)

Though Bleilip shares the same religion with these men, he feels no kinship, not even a desire to connect with these congregants. The closeness he seeks from Yussel is swiftly replaced in this setting with a bewildered alienation that reduces him to helplessness and a hallucinatory frenzy all at once. This inadequacy only worsens when his anonymity is shattered as the rebbe harshly addresses him, demanding to know Bleilip’s identity: “Who are you, what do you represent, what are you to us?” (Ozick 331). Dean J. Franco observes that such a question “already excludes Bleilip from the community and [...] suggests that Bleilip is estranged from Judaism itself” (Franco 80). Indeed, Bleilip feels as if he does not belong. Despite his bewilderment at the rabbi’s aggressive confrontation, Bleilip replies that he is Jew like every man in this room. But the rebbe refuses to accept this answer and hurls accusations at this visitor, calling him an atheist and other insults. Yet through the ordeal, Bleilip, observing the charismatic, authoritative rebbe’s mutilated hands, transfers his desire for understanding from Yussel to the rabbi instead. Although he does not practice Judaic rituals, Bleilip craves this Jewish leader’s acceptance. In addition, Bleilip knows “he was only a visitor and did not want so much: he wanted only what he needed, a certain piece of truth, not too big to swallow. He was afraid of choking on more. The rebbe said, ‘You believe the world is in vain, emes?’” (Ozick 331). Bleilip begins to protest, to
clarify that he has no interest in theology, but the rebbe interrupts and continually overpowers every attempt at an answer. In the midst of this combat, the rebbe orders Bleilip to empty his pockets. Deferring to this order, Bleilip pulls out a toy gun, drastically changing the service’s atmosphere. Without a word, the rabbi wraps up the plastic firearm, which Bleilip claims is not real, and proceeds to conclude the service by leading a final prayer.

Once this ceremony ends and the congregants rush away, the rebbe approaches Bleilip for a face-to-face showdown that only heightens the protagonist’s own urge to escape from himself. In short order, the rebbe commands Bleilip to empty his other pocket. Once again complying, Bleilip pulls out an actual gun to Yussel’s horror. Hysterical at the sight of this weapon, Yussel erupts and suggests the police should be called. But the rebbe reacts with complete calm, taking on a philosophical attitude instead. It is in this moment, amidst Yussel’s increasing fury, that the Jewish leader opens up about himself and shares his own vulnerability upon Bleilip’s glance at the rebbe’s disfigured hands. Matter-of-factly, the rebbe explains the torture he endured at Buchenwald, where his hands were immersed in blocks of ice as an experiment. Even more emphatically now, Yussel tells him not to talk with Bleilip, but the rebbe advises the protagonist’s host to go home. Any hope of attaining Yussel’s friendship has evaporated, but Bleilip does not care. He fixates on the rebbe alone now, fascinated by his candidness and grateful to have this holy man’s full attention:

He was pleased that the rebbe had dismissed Yussel. The day (but now it was night) felt full of miracles and lucky chances. Thanks to Yussel he had gotten to the rebbe. He never supposed he would get to the rebbe himself – all his hope was only for a glimpse of the effect of the rebbe. Of influences. With these he was satisfied. (Ozick 334)

Though Ozick never explains the powerful need for confirmation that drives Bleilip, he appears
to be drawn to defiant strength. Perhaps the shared connection to Judaism, though different in denomination, enchants him, too. While initially intimidated by the prayer service, Bleilip now feels reunited with a heritage he had lost contact with because his cosmopolitan life absorbed him into mainstream American culture. His former attraction to Yussel pales in comparison to this Holocaust survivor, despite the hostile air previously established between Bleilip and the rebbe. Interestingly, in Bleilip’s own feelings of weakness, he acquires a strength of sorts by association with the two unemotional men he encounters who both outlasted the Holocaust’s savagery. In the story’s waning minutes, however, as Bleilip and the rebbe stand opposite each other, an unexpected outburst occurs that demolishes any lasting warmth between the two men. When the rebbe comments on the firearm’s odor, Bleilip admits that he killed a pigeon with it. Shocked, the rabbi asks if Bleilip took the life of a bird. At this question, Bleilip unleashes his own rage, railing at “you believers” (Ozick 334), alluding to the Judaic acceptance of animal sacrifices as a hypocritical criticism of his own murder of a living creature. Philosophical once more, the rabbi responds by explaining the ebb and flow of belief: “‘It is characteristic of believers sometimes not to believe. And it is characteristic of unbelievers sometimes to believe. Even you, Mister Bleilip – even you now and then believe in the Holy one, Blessed be He? Even you now and then apprehend the most High?’” (Ozick 334). Bleilip disagrees and then agrees, proving the rebbe’s simple point. As a final judgment, the rebbe pronounces Bleilip “‘as bloody as anyone’” (Ozick 334). With this remark, the rebbe places Bleilip on a continuum alongside all of humanity, thereby supplying him with the ultimate connectedness that the story’s protagonist could not have discovered alone.

In essence, the rebbe reduces the intricacies of life in all its challenges to the binary of a
belief or a disbelief in God, quietly acknowledging that doubt remains a constant reality within this complicated mix, which links all human beings to one another. That wholehearted desire to believe, even through skepticism and the realities of occasional distrust, could explain both Yussel’s and the rebbe’s fortitude to survive the Holocaust’s inhumane brutality. Although both men suffered from very different experiences during this vicious event, with the rebbe’s wounds much more visible, their mutual devotion to Judaic practice may have been the path to endurance through faith. By contrast, Bleilip never confronted deadly circumstances, equipping him with the ferocity, the actual backbone, to prevail and to find meaning via spiritual methods, which his counterparts in the novella achieve. Ironically, however, of the three men, Bleilip is the one who carries a firearm, an instrument of death. Peter Kerry Powers notes the significance of this detail, pointing out how the rabbi observes “a gun in the pocket of Bleilip, the assimilated Jew who is seeking some connection with the past. The gun is itself a symbol of the Holocaust, and the rebbe uses it as an object lesson to assert that Bleilip cannot escape his complicity in Jewish history” (Powers 87).

Though he enjoyed the advantage of avoiding the Holocaust’s horrific brutality, Bleilip struggles with an alienation from his own heritage, a numbness caused by losing his attachment to Judaic practice and, as a result, a reason to believe. Until his unexpected encounter with the rebbe, where he witnesses a Judaism-oriented culture, Bleilip lacks any spiritual affinity. This void amounts to Bleilip’s intense need for closeness that he cannot really understand or identify before the rabbi’s succinct explanation of attaining religious conviction. To provide a meaningful contrast for Bleilip’s spiritual estrangement, Ozick incorporates the Holocaust and its vicious horror as a symbol of profound understanding in a community of

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29 Powers’s 1995 article titled “Disruptive Memories: Cynthia Ozick, Assimilation, and the Invented Past” examines how Ozick uses memory, the Holocaust, and Judaic tradition to promote the importance of Jewish identity.
devout Jews. Although the historic tragedy plays a significant role in differentiating Bleilip from the sullen Yussel and the fiery yet thoughtful rebbe, both survivors of this ordeal, Ozick refrains from supplying any direct descriptions of the Holocaust itself within her novella. That deliberate evasion changes quite consequently with her short story “The Shawl” (1980), which Ozick eventually expanded upon with a second piece titled “Rosa” (1983) to create a novella.\(^{30}\)

In addition to Ozick’s stark focus on the Holocaust within *The Shawl* (1989), where she artfully entwines desolation and dread to illustrate the terrible fear inspired by these circumstances, the author introduces a powerful and very memorable female protagonist. Equipped with greater complexity and depth than many of Ozick’s prior male central characters, Rosa Lublin’s perspective drives both sections of this work. During the first part, she witnesses the shocking and dehumanizing murder of her baby Magda in a concentration camp. The second portion occurs many decades later, after her emigration from Poland to America, where she still suffers from the agony of her daughter’s heartless killing. Both sections reflect a numbed detachment that serves as Rosa’s attempted shield from her immense anguish. Yet slivers of this pain appear along the deadened surface to depict Rosa’s unimaginable misery as an immeasurable undercurrent below. Told completely through Rosa’s eyes, Ozick integrates a third-person narrative style that differs in a considerable manner from the author’s previous stories. The richly descriptive prose, which characterizes Ozick’s prior writing, is replaced with a staccato tone that conveys basic facts without adornment, particularly in the work’s first segment. This approach creates a foreboding atmosphere that signals the grim fusion of

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\(^{30}\) Ozick first published “The Shawl” as a short story within *The New Yorker* in 1980. Then in 1983, she wrote a sequel titled “Rosa” that appeared in *The New Yorker* as well. Six years later in 1989, Ozick paired both pieces together to develop a novella that she named *The Shawl* after her initial short story.
uneasiness and apathy. Furthermore, the narrative portrays Rosa’s abject estrangement from the world as she labors to survive inhumane exile with Magda in the deathcamp and the resulting mental instability that plagues her with little societal concern decades later.

“The Shawl” begins with a profound contrast between the dangerous gloom that Rosa must endure in the concentration camp and the loveliness that she sees in Magda’s features. While walking with her fourteen-year-old niece Stella, Rosa keeps Magda carefully protected within the shawl, concealed from anyone who might suspect a baby is cradled inside:

She looked into Magda’s face through a gap in the shawl: a squirrel in a nest, safe, no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawl’s windings. The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa’s bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa’s coat. You could think she was one of their babies (Ozick 4)

Without naming the ghastly place, Ozick reveals this concentration-camp setting through an identifiable star stitched into Rosa’s clothes. The closeness between mother and daughter is also apparent in Ozick’s words, which demonstrate the only genuine connection that Rosa ever experiences. Yet a sense of awe merges with Rosa’s attachment as she recognizes that Magda’s fair skin tone and blue eyes resemble more of an Aryan look than the darker variety that so often denotes Jewish ancestry. Despite this awareness, which might resemble emotional distancing, Rosa’s observations convey love and admiration rather than repudiation. Furthermore, Ozick hints at Rosa’s mental vulnerability by implying the vision her heroine perceives of her daughter might not reflect reality. The image of this baby’s robust health suggests a mirage since Rosa visualizes a different face than the one actually nestled within the shawl’s folds. Perhaps the comfort Rosa feels through her protection of this helpless baby enables such a misleading idea to develop.
One explanation for Rosa’s distortion is her underlying dread, a sense she tries her best to avoid, though it lingers nonetheless, that death will soon separate her from Magda forever. As a result, Rosa fantasizes that the shawl is magical, capable of not only shielding but also restoring Magda to prevent such an awful fate. While obsessively attending to her baby, Rosa tolerates inhumane conditions for herself, often amounting to meager bits of food and insufficient shelter in the barracks where she, Magda, and Stella must sleep. Her only genuine comfort is seeing to Magda’s safety through the shawl’s refuge. But this peace of mind is shattered one day when Stella takes the shawl away overnight, exposing Magda to a demise that traumatizes Rosa’s life without end. Because of this theft, which Rosa discovers in the morning, the baby wanders outside during the roll-call area, openly howling for her tattered piece of cloth. At this point, the clipped nature of Ozick’s narrative generates a panicked quality to reflect Rosa’s own terror and resulting paralysis. She feels unsure about whether it would be best to retrieve Magda first or to grab the shawl from Stella before rescuing her child. In that split-second, Rosa seizes the shawl only to discover her decision’s fatal flaw. Magda now sits on an anonymous, uniformed shoulder that marches in the opposite direction. Rosa’s agony slices through Ozick’s description of the viciousness to follow, its dispassionate tone barely obscuring this unstated anguish:

All at once Magda was swimming through the air. The whole of Magda traveled through loftiness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine. And the moment Magda’s feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed against the fence, the steel voices went mad in their growling, urging Rosa to run and run to the spot where Magda had fallen from her flight against the electrified fence; but of course Rosa did not obey them. (Ozick 9-10).

Ozick’s words paint a moment of pure horror and heartbreak, with helplessness that merges into the sharp, stinging edges. While she bypasses any exploration of the depth of Rosa’s grief in that moment, the absolute torment rises through each devastating word as if in slow motion. Ozick
achieves a profound empathy for her novella’s heroine, where the narrative steadily builds toward this catastrophic moment that ruins Rosa’s life in an instant. Interestingly, though, Ozick utilizes the same violent method of utter brutality in Magda’s homicide as she applies to the attempted murder of Sheindel in “The Pagan Rabbi.” An electrified fence, a border that separates inhumanity from supposed moral society, might be viewed as yet another binary in Ozick’s often absolute, uncompromising universe. Within a world of such utter savagery, the vicious nature of Magda’s death creates an unforgettable effect. Miriam Sivan fittingly highlights the impact of this harrowing scene: “More than in any of the Holocaust hauntings in Cynthia Ozick’s fiction, it is the death of baby Magda and her mother Rosa’s torpid and numbed reaction to it that most wrenchingly causes [sic] the reader to suffer the horrors of the Shoah” (Sivan 42). Ozick’s vivid description of Magda’s final seconds generates such powerful emotions of grief that the experience feels immediate and unmediated.

In the process of allowing her audience to experience such horror, Ozick begins the second section of this novella, titled “Rosa,” with the heroine’s wretched desolation, still traumatized and unable to recover. Roughly four decades after her baby’s murder, characterizing Rosa as “a madwoman and a scavenger” (Ozick 13), the narration explains that she moved to Florida after destroying her own store. “In Florida she became a dependent. Her niece in New York sent her money and she lived among the elderly, in a dark hole, a single room in a ‘hotel’” (Ozick 13). Although Rosa survived horrendous adversity during the Holocaust, she emerged a broken, mentally debilitated woman, now reliant on the niece she continues to blame for

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31 Sivan’s 2005 article titled “Crossing the Abyss: Language and the Holocaust in Cynthia Ozick’s ‘The Shawl’” looks at the author’s treatment of this terrible event through multiple lenses. She focuses on the distinctions and disparate meanings between Rosa’s uplifting letters to Magda and her angry correspondence to Stella. In this way, Sivan contrasts how Rosa applies language to cope with her grief decades after losing her only child.
Magda’s violent end. Without the capacity to look out for herself, Rosa lives in a dingy hotel room alone, stranded in a state where she lacks any emotional connections and fixates on her daughter’s murder. Joseph Alkana offers a fitting portrait of Rosa’s development at this stage of her life, describing this protagonist “to be both alienated and alienating, someone who through bizarre and self-righteous judgments globally repels the sympathies of others” (Alkana 965). Indeed, Alkana succinctly summarizes the aftereffects of this trauma on Rosa, which damages both her and those she interacts with as well. Because she cannot develop affectionate relationships with anyone, Rosa obsessively writes long letters to Magda that reimagine her deceased baby as a powerful, invincible figure: “You have grown into a lioness. You are tawny and you stretch apart your furry toes in all their power. Whoever steals you steals her own death” (Ozick 15). Envisioning Magda with such strength gives Rosa comfort as she endures her lonely life and describes these vivid fantasies, which are scattered all over her room. Sivan observes the significance of Rosa’s communications, stating:

> These letters to Magda are like her surviving shawl, a kind of talisman for Rosa. Writing them, allowing herself to be enveloped in the presence of Magda as she composes sentences with great attention to aesthetics and literary detail demonstrates how for her language is the “primary ground of continuity with the Jewish past.” (Sivan 51).

Quoting from Robert Alter’s 1972 article “Is Our Schizophrenia Historically Important,” Sivan notes that Rosa’s letters are a therapy for her and furnish an essential connection to a Judaic heritage that had been seized from her with Magda’s extermination.

In addition to Rosa’s fantasies about her daughter, whom she conjectures to be alive in

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32 Joseph Alkana’s 1997 article titled “‘Do We Not Know the Meaning of Aesthetic Gratification?’: Cynthia Ozick’s ‘The Shawl’, the Akedah, and the Ethics of Holocaust Literary Aesthetics” offers detailed analysis of Ozick’s novella. He looks closely at Rosa from a psychological perspective while providing a context of Judaic history.
some unknown realm, this heroine’s notions of Stella are also twisted through her simultaneous hatred and reliance on her as her only connection to a reality she shuns. Furthermore, because Rosa feels so disengaged herself, she envisions everyone around her in this strange state of Florida to share the same sentiment:

> It seemed to Rosa Lublin that the whole peninsula of Florida was weighted down with regret. Everyone had left behind a real life. Here they had nothing. They were all scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty rib cages. (Ozick 16)

Rosa’s own misery causes her to see the people around her through a warped perspective, where affliction and immense isolation prevail. But Rosa’s solitude is interrupted when she happens to meet an older man named Simon Persky as they both sit next to each other in a laundromat. Even though she shows no interest in engaging with him, Simon is persistent. Eventually, the two discover they both grew up in Warsaw, though not at the same time. Simon, at seventy-one is a few years older than Rosa, now reaching the end of her fifth decade. Although Rosa responds to him with distant courtesy, she feels irritated by this man whom she views as beneath her in terms of economic class and intellectual ability. Despite viewing herself as superior, she still accepts Simon’s invitation to go to a cafeteria down the street, where they open up to each other.

But Rosa’s slowly blossoming warmth for Simon, however hesitant, does not change the overall way she sees the strangers around her at the hotel, who she believes are all just as isolated. Once she returns from her date, fresh from this unexpected interaction, Rosa observes everyone in the same hopeless light, never revising her assessment: “The guests were detached; they had detached themselves. Little by little they were forgetting their grandchildren, their aging children. More and more they were growing significant to themselves” (Ozick 29). In addition to these negative conclusions about her neighbors, Rosa instantly forgets about Simon and is
excited to see two packages waiting for her at the desk, one she anticipates to be Magda’s shawl, sent to her from Stella: “Magda’s shawl! Magda’s swaddling cloth. Magda’s shroud. The memory of Magda’s smell, the holy fragrance of the lost babe. Murdered. Thrown against the fence, barbed, thorned, electrified; grid and griddle; a furnace, the child on fire! Rosa put the shawl to her nose, to her lips” (Ozick 31). The joy that Rosa feels at receiving this fragment of fabric indicates how the trauma of Magda’s death remains so central to her life. Even as she moves forward in small, halting steps, Rosa cannot productively incorporate this grief into her existence. Instead, it haunts her to the point of immobilized isolation, which she refuses to address. This obstinacy becomes clear with the second correspondence that Rosa receives. A doctor of clinical social pathology from the University of Kansas-Iowa named James W. Tree writes to ask for an interview to build on his collection of survivor data. Insulted by Dr. Tree’s letter, one of many requests she has received from similar endeavors, Rosa feels enraged by the dehumanization that she detects. Her mind fastens on the offense of classifying her as a survivor:

Consider also the special word they used: survivor. Something new. As long as they didn’t have to say human being. It used to be refugee, but by now there was no such creature, no more refugees, only survivors. A name like a number – counted apart from the ordinary swarm. Blue digits on the arm, what difference? They don’t call you a woman anyhow. Survivor. Even when your bones get melted into the grains of the earth, still they’ll forget human being. Survivor and survivor and survivor; always and always. Who made up these words, parasites on the throat of suffering! (Ozick 36-37)

Instead of regarding Dr. Tree as a resource, someone who might be able to help her heal, Rosa views him with scornful suspicion. Her simplistic interpretation of the word “survivor” stops Rosa from considering the request with anything beyond contempt. Indeed, she transfers the same horrors she endured at the deathcamp to Dr. Tree, where her daughter’s humanity had been so cruelly discarded. To Rosa, Dr. Tree shares this same guilt, confirming the unspoken truth of
her own sense of estrangement from society. While she accuses him of consolidating her individual self into an anonymous mass, Rosa has actually made this choice on her own, virtually removing herself from human connections out of an inability to cope. Too blinded by rage and years of suppressed helplessness, she cannot view Dr. Tree as a potential pathway out of her incessant alienation.

The same resentment and distrust that Rosa projects onto Dr. Tree are also angrily propelled onto Stella and Simon, concerned people who attempt to rescue her from relentless seclusion. As Ozick’s narrative unfolds further, following Rosa’s anger-driven escapades, where she searches for the underwear she believes Simon stole from her, aggressively surges into a hotel she imagines to be Dr. Tree’s location, and speaks with manic urgency to Stella, the protagonist’s fragile mental state crystalizes. A late-night phone call to Stella displays Rosa’s skewed perception in which all of these questionable assumptions about each individual are confirmed. Although she inwardly labels Stella as heartless and the “Angel of Death,” their brief conversation reveals her niece’s concern for Rosa. Worried about Rosa’s self-imposed isolation, Stella urges her aunt to get involved somehow and join a club, even offering to cover any expenses. But Rosa views her niece’s overtures with suspicion. She comes to a similar conclusion about Simon, though Rosa discovers that the absent pair of underwear had not been stolen by this man, only hidden within other clothes from the laundromat. Sadly, Rosa’s confrontation with a hotel manager reveals her damaged mind even more. Certain that Dr. Tree must be staying in one of the rooms, she yells at this stranger, who eventually demands that she leave. Even after the manager discloses that he is Jewish, too, she explodes at him for having barbed wire by the beach and exclaims: “‘Only Nazis catch innocent people behind barbed
Like assertions about Dr. Tree, Rosa creates fabricated charges against the hotel manager, mistakenly associating him with the Nazis’ ferocious cruelty. In the process of delineating Rosa’s total detachment from reality, Ozick portrays a society that shows little patience or regard for those who are vulnerable. Though Rosa’s outbursts are not acceptable, the reactions of people who encounter her consistently demonstrate cold derision and impatience without even a hint of empathy, further encouraging her inevitable isolation. Thus, Rosa’s alienation never improves, but remains reinforced at every turn.

This novella concludes quite similarly to its opening, where the most crucial connection of any nurturing value to Rosa is her own child. Even so many years after Magda’s brutal death, she is still Rosa’s closest attachment. Alone in her darkened room, Rosa regularly speaks to Magda. Within the narrative, Ozick gives Magda a magical bearing that brightens Rosa’s grim space during these one-sided conversations. Through a breathless stream of consciousness that demonstrates immense devotion to her deceased child, Rosa recollects a life and a family before the Holocaust’s devastation. These reminiscences are Rosa’s only source of joy and she always regrets the moment when Magda begins to disappear, apparently aware of anyone who might interrupt their frequent bonding sessions: “Magda collapsed at any stir, fearful as a phantom. She behaved at these moments as if she was ashamed, and hid herself. Magda, my beloved, don’t be ashamed! Butterfly, I am not ashamed of your presence: only come to me, come to me again, if no longer now, then later, always come” (Ozick 69). Magda’s ghost alone inspires Rosa’s loving, tender side. Even though this attitude excludes anyone else from Rosa’s life, upholding her isolation, she appears content with such an existence, virtually shunning the help offered by others. Ozick’s descriptions make clear that Rosa desperately needs care for her increasing
mental deterioration, further underscoring the warped disconnection from reality caused by her extreme sorrow. However, the novella ends with a glimmer of hope when Simon Persky arrives at the hotel to visit Rosa. She accepts the front desk’s call, replying, “‘He’s used to crazy women, so let him come up’” (Ozick 70). Referring to Simon’s prior revelation that his wife resides at a mental health institution, Rosa humorously acknowledges her own instability. What’s more, it is her most sensible statement in the entire story. Rosa’s willingness to allow Simon into her room offers the promise that she might develop a meaningful relationship and cope with her grief more productively. Lawrence S. Friedman observes the significance of Rosa’s decision in terms of her future: “To welcome Persky is to admit the possibility of post-Holocaust life” (Friedman 120). Indeed, Simon Persky exemplifies the hopeful possibility that Rosa might transcend her traumatic past.

In Rosa Lublin, Ozick conceptualizes a memorable woman character whose psychological distress and anguished estrangement reflect a distinct authenticity. Rosa comes alive in vital ways that Ozick’s prior male protagonists somehow lack. Because Ozick ingrains such emotion into Rosa, weaving together her distorted reflections, anguish, and resulting outbursts into a believable texture of grief-stricken desolation, she comes across with a sympathetic veracity despite her antagonism. Without any counseling or support to help her cope, Rosa’s self-destructive behavior and inability to form lasting relationships beyond the complicated link that she shares with Stella are predictable consequences. Furthermore, societal indifference toward her, with the exception of Dr. Tree’s written overtures, only perpetuate the alienation that she constantly endures.

But Rosa is not Ozick’s only intricate woman character who distinguishes herself and her
personal knowledge of estrangement among the author’s extensive body of work. Ruth Puttermesser represents another crucial female protagonist with similar distinctions in terms of her ability to generate empathy and emotional warmth because of her unique struggle to secure meaningful connections in a life of cultural loneliness. Unlike Rosa, who is primitive in many aspects, Puttermesser epitomizes an educational and a psychological awareness that her counterpart never achieves. Yet due to the various settings and conflicts that Ozick creates, Puttermesser also succumbs to a number of difficult circumstances which consistently highlight her overall societal desolation and relate to her Judaic identity. Composed of five different novellas written over a period of fifteen years and published separately at first, *The Puttermesser Papers*\(^{33}\) chronicles Ruth Puttermesser’s adult life from the age of thirty-four until the heroine’s sudden and brutal death by her late sixties. Of these five journeys, the first three chapters titled “Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife,” “Puttermesser and Xanthippe,” and “Puttermesser Paired” are the most relevant to Ozick’s exploration of this protagonist’s experience as a culturally exiled Jewish woman navigating life in New York. Timothy L. Parrish remarks that the individual stories that explore Puttermesser revolve around the same concept:

*The Puttermesser Papers* is less one book than a compendium of books. Each one is about creation and is concerned with a single mysterious figure: Ruth Puttermesser [...] Consequently, the book comes across not as a unified work in a traditional, new critical sense, but as a kind of series of separate though related commentaries upon

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\(^{33}\) Ozick began publishing her stories about Ruth Puttermesser in 1982. They appeared in a number of different publications before Ozick unified them into one novel titled *The Puttermesser Papers* in 1997. She included the first two installments “Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife” and “Puttermesser and Xanthippe” in her collection *Levitation: Five Fictions* (1982). Prior to their publications, she provided a preview of these stories in *The New York Times’* June 6, 1982 edition of the “Works in Progress” column. “Puttermesser in Paradise” was first published in a slightly different version within the May 1997 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*. In addition, “Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife,” “Puttermesser Paired,” and “Puttermesser and the Muscovite Cousin” were also separately published in *The New Yorker*. Lastly, “Puttermesser and Xanthippe” was published in the January 1982 volume of the journal *Salmagundi*. 
the life of Ruth Puttermesser. (Parrish 446-47)³⁴

Parrish points out the centrality of creation that Ozick reimagines with the individual
Puttermesser novellas, each connected in a sequence. Alongside Puttermesser’s ability to
generate new worlds intrinsic to these stories is the actual isolation that furnishes her with such
freedom, which only intensifies with every scenario that Ozick constructs.

In addition to the serious situations that this author creates to test Puttermesser’s Jewish
womanhood and to illustrate the complicated facets of alienation that her heroine faces, Ozick’s
narrative portrayals reflect a notably different tone. In addition to complex facets and references
to often-obscure Judaic traditions, she integrates a whimsical feel to her depictions of
Puttermesser’s various wanderings. This playfulness is immediately apparent in
“Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife.”³⁵ The piece opens by presenting
crucial aspects of Puttermesser in a reporter-like style with a facetious touch:

Puttermesser was thirty-four, a lawyer. She was also something of a feminist,
not crazy, but she resented having ‘Miss’ put in front of her name; she thought it
pointedly discriminatory; she wanted to be a lawyer among lawyers. Though she
was no virgin she lived alone, but idiosyncratically – in the Bronx, on the Grand
Concourse, among other people’s decaying old parents. (Ozick 125)

The lighthearted quality in Ozick’s narrative immediately infuses Puttermesser with a likeable
nature, unlike the author’s portrayal of Rosa. Furthermore, the fact that Ozick refers to

³⁴ Parrish’s 2001 article titled “Creation’s Covenant: The Art of Cynthia Ozick” closely examines a crucial struggle
that Ozick endures as a writer. He closely examines Ozick’s angst about her need to write and its sacrilegious
betrayal of God as the ultimate creator. Through his analysis of Ozick’s alter ego Ruth Puttermesser, Parrish
scrutinizes how Ozick has evolved through the decades to understand the value of creative imagination and how it
does not preclude practicing Judaic traditions.

³⁵ For the purposes of this analysis, “Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife” and
“Puttermesser and Xanthippe” are taken from Kauvar’s A Cynthia Ozick Reader (1996). “Puttermesser Paired,”
“Puttermesser and the Muscovite Cousin,” and “Puttermesser in Paradise” are quoted from The Puttermesser Papers
(1997).
Puttermesser by her last name alone equates her from the start with many of the author’s male protagonists. Although Ozick makes it clear within the first sentence that Puttermesser is a woman, her name’s mention within the narrative does not differ from other chief characters due to gender. In this series of descriptions, Ozick summarizes the essence of Puttermesser, her mildly feminist leanings, and her solo yet not necessarily unapproachable nature. Later, Ozick also weaves Puttermesser’s religious identification within her introductory narrative, but only in the context of her professional experience as a lawyer progressing in her career: “Though a Jew and a woman, she felt little discrimination: the back office was chiefly the repository of unmitigated drudgery and therefore of usable youth” (Ozick 127). While Puttermesser does not endure any prejudice from her minority status at this firm, Ozick does clarify that this protagonist represents the sole woman, though not the solitary Jew in the workplace, establishing two levels of potential estrangement. In time, Puttermesser decides to move forward from a private law firm to a bureaucratic environment, where she instantly feels her anonymity: “Here she was not even a curiosity. No one noticed a Jew. Unlike the partners at Midland, Reid, the Commissioners did not travel out among their subjects and were rarely seen. Instead they were like shut-up kings in a tower, and suffered from rumors” (Ozick 130). At this stage, Puttermesser begins to experience a sense of namelessness as she is swallowed up into the governmental abyss without any concrete identity.

In the midst of this difficult transition, Puttermesser decides to learn Hebrew, restoring Judaic roots that she had previously neglected, and builds a relationship with her elderly relative named Uncle Zindel. Ozick describes the considerable endeavor Puttermesser must undertake to travel to her uncle two evenings each week. In addition, she depicts the lively interactions
between Puttermesser and Uncle Zindel during these Hebrew lesson. But at this point, which appears to be a realistic portrait of Puttermesser’s effort to strengthen her Jewish identity and ancestry, Ozick demolishes the prose’s straightforwardly descriptive progression. In one unexpected move, she splits the established omniscient style into two distinct voices. “Stop. Stop, stop! Puttermesser’s biographer, stop! Disengage, please. Though it is true that biographies are invented, not recorded, here you invent too much. A symbol is allowed, but not a whole scene” (Ozick 135). With this switch, the narrator is determined to be an actual figure, someone documenting Puttermesser’s life, not an abstraction anymore. The tongue-in-cheek tone that opens this introduction to Puttermesser continues here, but with an unanticipated injection of whimsical humor. Puttermesser’s so-called biographer pushes ahead to explain the fictional nature of her relationship to Uncle Zindel. Because of his burial four years before her birth, this association to Puttermesser’s Jewish past does not actually exist. Yet the narrator observes how this reality leaves a profound chasm in Puttermesser’s ability to feel a kinship with her own legacy: “But Puttermesser must claim an ancestor. She demands connection – surely a Jew must own a past. Poor Puttermesser has found herself in the world without a past” (Ozick 135). Through this narrative observation, Puttermesser’s disorientation and lack of cultural attachments become quite clear. Ozick builds on this framework further with a flurry of rushed details that feel detached from the reality built so far. Quite intriguingly, the narrative ends on a note of comical suspense as it reverts back to addressing the narrator by name: “Hey! Puttermesser’s biographer! What will you do with her now?” (Ozick 136). This ending leaves all of the possibilities for Puttermesser’s future wide open while eagerly suggesting the promise of adventures to come.
Ozick’s first installment of the Puttermesser saga lays a fanciful groundwork for her cultural separateness and Jewish identity in the most faith-oriented chapter of this protagonist’s adventure. The second chapter, which Ozick calls “Puttermesser and Xanthippe,” merges the desire for a Judaic footprint, the need to leave a meaningful impact on the community, and the possibility of mystical elements into the most faith-oriented episode of the lengthy epic. By this time, Puttermesser has reached the age of forty-six, remains single, and continues to work as a lawyer, but now in a civil servant role. Puttermesser’s life contains some instability due to her casual affair with married Canadian fundraiser Morris Rappoport and professional turbulence at the Department of Receipts and Disbursements, where a new, younger figurehead has now become her manager. Until this appointment, she steadily rose up the ladder because of comprehensive knowledge she had accumulated over a substantial amount of time and from working under numerous supervisors without her notable tax-related experience. However, when the mayor of New York decides to replace the commissioner whom Puttermesser reported to at this high level, the unfortunate process of her humiliating downfall begins, which accentuates a vulnerability she never anticipated before. To her horror, Puttermesser’s new manager, someone with an arts degree and no background in tax law, promptly decides to replace her, a seasoned attorney, with his close friend from college, also an outsider in the field. Puttermesser swiftly realizes “the Department of Receipts and Disbursements was now in the hands of young men who had been trained to pursue illusion, to fly with a gossamer net after fleeting shadows. They were attracted to the dark, where fraudulent emotions raged” (Ozick 144). All of the mastery that once made Puttermesser relevant is now meaningless in this revised power structure. Her
substantial knowledge represents no value whatsoever and nonsensically supplies a reason to exclude her with heartless nonchalance.

Feeling overlooked, peripheral to the department, and forgotten, Puttermesser nurses a wounded ego as her supervisor keeps thrusting the former well-regarded tax attorney further downward. More alone than ever, her thoughts shift toward leaving some sort of a legacy, pondering notions she never considered before despite accepting her perpetual state of singlehood. “She knew she would never marry, but she was not yet reconciled to childlessness. Sometimes the thought that she would never give birth tore her heart. She imagined daughters. It was self-love: all these daughters were Puttermesser as a child” (Ozick 146-47). Due to the pain of her traumatic rejection at work, the place that principally furnished her identity, Puttermesser contemplates the dearth of emotional support in her life. The thought of having a child to establish that profound link, uniting her somehow to the larger world beyond her bureaucratic self, offers welcome comfort. In the midst of Puttermesser’s longings, Ozick introduces a mystical, quite supernatural component to the tale. During Puttermesser’s fantasies about having a daughter who resembles her and the regrets about this choice to be childless, she discovers a creature alongside her that has surfaced from her bed. Ozick seamlessly converges this fantastical presence into her narrative, which morphs into human form before Puttermesser’s eyes. Through a surprising calm conversation with this individual, Puttermesser learns she is the creator of the being who asks for a name. When Puttermesser chooses to call her Leah, she receives a negative response: “No, the creature wrote, ‘Leah is my name, but I want to be Xanthippe [...] I am made of earth but also I am made out of your mind” (Ozick 151). Upon this chapter’s opening, Puttermesser is reading Plato’s *Theaetetus* in bed during a disagreement with
her boyfriend Rappoport. He wants intimacy while she prefers to quote from Socrates. Now this being, who identifies as female, insists on assuming the name of Socrates’s wife. As Puttermesser submits to Xanthippe, she reflects on how these pieces fit together: “It came to her that the creature was certainly not lying. Puttermesser’s fingernails were crowded with grains of earth. In some unknown hour after Rappoport’s departure in the night, Puttermesser had shaped an apparition. She had awakened it to life in the conventional way. Xanthippe was a golem, and what had polymathic Puttermesser not read about the genus golem?” (Ozick 151). Slowly, it dawns on Puttermesser that she is, indeed, this being’s mother for it evolved from her thoughts into physical form. Parrish clarifies the characterization of Puttermesser as seeking a child in her own image. In his view, her need extends beyond parental instincts: “Puttermesser’s daughter-desire is at one point identified as ‘self-love,’ but her desire to make a golem springs from her desire to create what amounts to her own universe” (Parrish 451). Indeed, Puttermesser, suffering from a professional life that has deteriorated out of her control, wants to obtain command over her existence once again. Shaping a world of her own offers that much-needed agency, which she has unfairly lost.

To understand Ozick’s direction even further, where Puttermesser’s intimate companionship during this most desolate time derives from her mind, awareness of Jewish mysticism is necessary. Ozick’s integration of this obscure practice, based on Rabbi Judah Loew’s alleged creation and destruction of golems in the sixteenth century, adds an intriguing component that temporarily weighs down the tale with a didactic feel. Her narrative digresses from exploring Puttermesser’s discovery of her intellectual ability to generate a descendant to an informational, densely written explanation of these paranormal steps according to ancient
Kabbalist lore. Once Ozick establishes this context, though, she returns to the development of this unlikely relationship that initially enhances Puttermesser’s life, both in the professional and personal realms, before causing inevitable turmoil. Because Xanthippe embodies Puttermesser’s thoughts, goals, and aspirations, she cleverly devises a plan for her mother to prevail in New York’s government offices, rising above the unjust treatment to become the city’s mayor. In implementing the political strategy, Xanthippe announces to Puttermesser: “I will serve your brain. I am your offspring, you are my mother. I am the execution of the grandeur of your principles. Grand design is my business. Leave visionary restoration to me” (Ozick 169). Xanthippe’s words are not spoken lightly. She makes an ardent pledge to ensure that Puttermesser prevails in a successful campaign, which she carries out with mechanical precision. For a period of time, New York thrives under Puttermesser’s leadership. She creates a society that brings citizens together, where economic classes are blurred into virtual nonexistence because people productively come together to maintain the city, each contributing to its prosperity with a newfound pride. For once, Puttermesser feels significant, the architect of a crucial effort to unify and empower residents at every level.

However, as she reflects on this massive accomplishment, which obliterated her past struggles with immense loneliness, Puttermesser wonders about her own control over these circumstances. Uneasy, she marvels:

The coming of the golem animated the salvation of the City, yes – but who, Puttermesser sometimes wonders, is the true golem? Is it Xanthippe or is it Puttermesser? Puttermesser made Xanthippe; Xanthippe did not exist before Puttermesser made her: that is clear enough. But Xanthippe made Puttermesser Mayor, and Mayor Puttermesser too did not exist before. And that is just as clear. Puttermesser sees that she is the golem’s golem. (Ozick 177)
Although the golem materialized from Puttermesser’s own powerlessness over her undeserved demotion, she wonders if Xanthippe is the actual creator of the city’s positive developments, not her at all. Meanwhile, the golem begins to expand, both literally and figuratively, enlarging in her opinions of her authority and in her physical size. Though mute and dependent on a notepad to communicate, Xanthippe becomes insatiable due to the influence she has exerted in propelling Puttermesser to such triumph. The golem’s sexual appetite coupled with an incessant need to overindulge in every way possible to cause havoc have made her an unmanageable entity. As a result, she systematically begins to undo all of the city’s great progress. New York’s unfortunate spiral to depressing depths, which lead back to its struggles with poverty, corruption, and greed, eventually unseat Puttermesser. It becomes clear that the golem is a danger to society. So just like her reliance on Rabbi Judah Loew to understand the golem’s creation, Puttermesser seeks guidance from this Kabbalist’s books for insight: “The turning against the creator is an ‘attribute’ of a golem, comparable to its speechlessness, its incapacity for procreation, its soullessness. A golem has no soul, therefore, cannot die – rather, it is returned to the elements of its making” (Ozick 183). While Xanthippe’s predictable behavior is confirmed in these texts, fully corroborating Puttermesser’s suspicions, she still feels pained at the thought of severing this tie. She cannot reconcile the soulless nature of a being Puttermesser essentially created from out of herself. With the help of her occasional boyfriend Rappoport, Puttermesser carries out the medieval ritual designed to dispose of golems, returning Xanthippe to the earth. Despite realizing the inevitability of this process, she still feels terrible agony at Xanthippe’s disintegration. Grief erupts through her thoughts in the story’s last lines: “And all the while Puttermesser calls in her heart: O lost New York! And she calls: O lost Xanthippe!” (Ozick 192).
Though the golem developed from Puttermesser’s mind, she signifies much more than a mental extension. Indeed, Xanthippe, literally an outgrowth of Puttermesser herself, fulfilled her desire to create a legacy, which the resulting rebirth of New York illustrates. Therefore, Xanthippe’s dissolution coincides with the city’s own reversal, complicating Puttermesser’s sorrow beyond her newly blossomed maternal instincts alone. In the end, she remains just as solitary and as spiritually desolate as she had been at the novella’s start. Peter Kerry Powers offers an astute observation concerning Puttermesser’s need to forge a profound and lasting link to her heritage: “Puttermesser is a character in search of history, or more precisely, an ancestry, a living connection to the past that will give her life meaning beyond her mundane efforts in a civic bureaucracy” (Powers 82). Therefore, Xanthippe’s destruction, though necessary, demolishes Puttermesser’s own motherly identity, a side of herself that she never knew before and cherished as the blissful attainment of ancestral connectedness. With the golem’s annihilation, Ozick demonstrates her eternal dilemma, where severe repercussions can arise when humanity engages in creation that transgresses conventional means. Because Puttermesser appropriated the role of God, she is rigorously punished through the dreadful loss of her offspring, which reinforces her desolation even further. Interestingly, both Puttermesser and Rosa are mothers, to different degrees, whom Ozick assigns creative abilities only to lose their daughters by brutal means. Perhaps their imaginative talents and subsequent heartbreak are also extensions of the author’s everlasting struggle to reconcile creation with traditional Judaic faith.

This same pattern of severe loneliness, the unanticipated hope for an emotionally fulfilling attachment, and unbearable distress at the relationship’s collapse transpires in Ozick’s next chapter “Puttermesser Paired.” Now past her fifties, Puttermesser subsists from her savings,
officially retired from government work as well as any attachment whatsoever to the legal world. Without any outside stimulation, she locks herself into the bygone eras of her life. While sorting through boxes under her bed, Puttermesser finds a letter from her mother sent years earlier when her parents lived in Florida. Desperate for her daughter not to live alone anymore, she strongly urges Puttermesser to consider marriage:

“If you don’t get married where will you be, what will happen? Alone is a stone as they say and believe me Ruthie Papa agrees with me on this issue not only double but triple, we didn’t come down here to live in the heat with Papa’s bursitis only in order to break his heart from you and your brains.” (Ozick 105)

Though Puttermesser regards this aged correspondence with a certain degree of detachment, she also understands her mother’s point. Labeling herself as “an elderly orphan,” Puttermesser agrees “it was possible for brains to break the heart” (Ozick 105-6). Living in such extreme isolation now, not even having a workplace to experience interaction, Puttermesser has an unobstructed perspective of her disconnection from the world. But she is not alone in her alienated existence as Ozick demonstrates. The building in which Puttermesser lives serves as a microcosm for innumerable stories of sadness, where the apartments’ partitions are an emblem for the separateness within each shell. It represents a network of namelessness, where Puttermesser often receives her neighbors’ mail and deliveries: “The building, with its dedication to anonymity (each mysterious soul invisible in its own cubicle), was subject to jitters and multiple confusions. Mixups, mishaps, misdeliveries, misnamings. To the doorman she was Miss Perlmutter” (Ozick 109). Indeed, Ozick describes a community of passive division, where residents share the same space without ever making any meaningful contact with each other.

Yet when Puttermesser mistakenly receives a flyer in her mailbox for a singles event, she seriously contemplates edging out of her tiny home for companionship. In the end, though, she
slips the announcement underneath the intended recipient’s door just in time to receive another mistaken delivery. This time, a large stack of pizzas are left for her, which Puttermesser then carries to a different neighbor she has never met before. While righting these infuriating wrongs, her mind continues to explore the idea of marriage her mother’s letter had introduced into Puttermesser’s thoughts:

What she was concentrating on was marriage: the marriage of true minds. Reciprocal transcendence – she was not thinking of sinew, synapse, hormone-fired spasm. Those couples who saunter by with arms like serpents wrapped around each other, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk to plug mouth on mouth: biological robots, twitches powered by pitiless instinct. Puttermesser, despite everything, was not beyond idealism; she believed (admittedly the proposition wouldn’t stand up under rigorous questioning) she had a soul. She dreamed – why not dream? – of a wedding of like souls. (Ozick 111)

By now, Puttermesser feels disinclined for the excitement of romance and passion. Furthermore, she makes no stipulation that this spouse should be Jewish. Puttermesser simply wants the companionship that marriage provides, not necessarily the chemical attraction or cultural connection that so often characterize matrimony. Part of Puttermesser’s image of the ideal union is derived from recently reading a biography of George Eliot borrowed from her neighborhood library. She feels drawn to the emotional connection that Eliot shared with her soulmate George Lewes, awed by their intellectual compatibility, and yearns for such a powerful bond. Little does Puttermesser realize that bringing this pile of pizzas to her upstairs neighbor Harvey Morgenbluth will set events in motion for her to experience such an opportunity to mate. In passing, she encounters her future liaison as he slips through this neighbor’s door at the moment of her departure. With Puttermesser’s desire to find a spouse and the developing restlessness of her confinement at home for hours at a time, she calculates excuses to venture outside on minor errands. After selecting a collection of Eliot’s letters from the library, she wanders to the
Metropolitan Museum, where she encounters the same man from Morgenbluth’s party. He has an easel set up in front of a painting named “The Death of Socrates,” which he copies with great concentration from his perch. Slyly integrating Socrates once more into Puttermesser’s adventures, Ozick’s narrative portrays the protagonist’s lively conversation with this individual about his vocation of replicating art. Though the man responds with defensive retorts to Puttermesser’s playful challenges, where he explains his art while she accuses him of copying the imagination of others, the story’s heroine feels invigorated by this debate. Joyous, she channels her mother to share this intellectual thrill. To Puttermesser, that type of vigorous communication epitomizes a relationship with an encouraging future: “Mama, she called back to her mother through the dried-up marshes of so many lost decades, look, mama, the brain is the seat of the emotions, I always told you so!” (Ozick 126). The spirited exchange of ideas, however emotional or argumentative, signifies the like-minded unity that Puttermesser so desires.

Immediately, a friendship develops between her and copyist Rupert Rabeeno, providing Puttermesser with both an instant companion and a receptive listener from that moment forward. Although a significant difference exists between their ages, Rupert does not express any misgivings. “He never thought of her as too old. Nothing grotesque lay between them, She believed that now. They were friends, ideal friends. She saw how he had become more zealous than she” (Ozick 135). As a result of his warm acceptance, Puttermesser feels relaxed and able to open her heart to Rupert without hesitation. In the evolution of this most welcome trust, she shares her passion for George Eliot and the two begin reading the author’s letters aloud to each other. They become inseparable, spending hours together in Puttermesser’s apartment,
energetically performing Eliot’s dramatic and tragic personal life. Through this epic, Rupert immerses himself with eager depth in his roles, particularly as Eliot’s spouse Johnny Cross, even appearing to take on this figure’s emotional identity. Ozick integrates Puttermesser and Rupert into Eliot’s text with a seamlessness that blurs any distinction between the literary text and reality. As a direct consequence, Puttermesser and Rupert are incorporated into Eliot’s framework of turbulent emotions and passions, pulled into a story that is not actually their own. Indeed, Puttermesser often imagines Rupert to be Lewes before the text transitions to Cross. Due to the intensity of the pair’s oral readings, which leads them to a whole other enriching dimension, it is often unclear whether Puttermesser’s feelings are inspired by Rupert or Eliot’s love interests. These boundaries are clouded by a complex uncertainty that both Puttermesser and Rupert seem to relish as they lead alternate lives. Caught up in the moment as Eliot’s honeymoon unfolds, Rupert eagerly suggests that he and Puttermesser also get married to each other. Although Puttermesser feels doubtful at first, supposing that Rupert is not serious, she soon discovers his commitment to this next stage in their fusion with Eliot’s existence.

While still intensely bonded together by the experience of these reenactments, Puttermesser and Rupert wed, officially replicating their literary counterparts. At various moments through the haze of Eliot and Cross, however, Puttermesser feels quietly unsure of her own standing with Rupert as they take this important step. Planning the wedding also makes Puttermesser realize how she lacks any links to family members in her life, essentially ensuring strangers to be their witnesses. Ozick documents these details in the style of a detached report that excludes any descriptive summaries reminiscent of Eliot’s theatrical scenes. Without this melodramatic spectacle to cement them together, the relationship between Puttermesser and
Rupert feels awkward, a portrait of two out-of-sync individuals who are both lost and very much alone. Despite sharing these qualities of social gracelessness, the two have little else in common. But they still proceed to carry out this wedding with Puttermesser’s neighbor Raya Lieberman, the intended recipient of that singles-event announcement, as one witness and Morgenbluth as the other. Puttermesser overhears their flirtation in the taxicab while driving to the courthouse with Rupert and the rabbi, who represents the only Judaic aspect within these nuptials. In particular, Raya makes an observation that underscores Puttermesser’s own struggle to develop meaningful connections amid the helpless isolation that surrounds her: “‘Nobody opens up nowadays. It’s hard for people to be in touch. Everyone’s a lonesome atom’” (Ozick 161). Raya’s simple reflection pinpoints what Puttermesser has consistently endured over decades of singlehood. In addition, it provides a doomed signal of Puttermesser’s marriage, which is based on an artificial understanding without any actual substance. After the modest celebration with champagne in Styrofoam cups at Puttermesser’s apartment, the two witnesses leave. Their absence creates tension for Puttermesser as she anticipates the first romantic connection with her new husband:

Her heart – her fleshly heart – was curled around itself, like a spiraled loaf of hot new bread. Inside the cavity that rocked it, this good bread was swelling. Puttermesser waited for Rupert’s head to come into her arms, against her heart’s loaf. She waited for his voice, his dark reading voice, with its sharp click that could cut her with happiness, like a beak. The living, plain, pitiful flesh. Sometimes, for all the uproar of his history (he had handed over every winding of his life to her; he kept nothing back), he seemed new-made – as if she had ejected him from a secret spectral egg lodged in her frontal lobe, or under her tongue where the sour saliva gave birth to desire. He was her own shadow and fingerprint. She had painted him on her retina in her sleep. She felt him to be the smothered croak in her throat, a phlegm of chaos burst out of her lung. He had lived too long in her nerves, and her nerves were all wired to the transcendent. Desire, desire! She and Rupert – both of them – were too tentative. (Ozick 162-63)
For the first time since their fervent attachment through Eliot’s personas, Puttermesser and Rupert are now alone in their relationship with each other. It is here, in this moment, that Puttermesser sees Rupert without the filter of Lewes or Cross to obscure her appreciation of him. Beneath that performance, though, the feelings already existed, enhanced by their interactive reading, the sound of his voice as they shared this experience together. But now Puttermesser’s emotions are clearer than ever in the newness of this next phase of their bond.

Yet just as Puttermesser enjoys the comfort of her anticipated closeness with Rupert, he denies his new wife this contentment by abandoning her on their wedding night. His decision fulfills the final moments of Eliot’s honeymoon with Johnny Cross, where Rupert’s literary equivalent leaps from the window in Venice to avoid consummating the marriage. Puttermesser notices her new husband has a troubling demeanor: “There was something in his face she recognized. An indifference had seeped into the gloom. It was as if she had turned invisible” (Ozick 164). While Puttermesser understands how to perceive Rupert through the veil of their former, fabricated world, he lacks this same ability. Now that the readings between them are over, Puttermesser does not exist to him anymore. Still, she asks him to explain his departure and he simply tells her he cannot stay. Although Ozick foreshadows Rupert’s desertion through the parallel advancement of Johnny’s escape, the ache that Puttermesser experiences is unexpected in its rawness. Ozick’s short, clipped sentences, a numbness that contrasts with the richly descriptive synopses of Eliot’s chronicle, accentuate Puttermesser’s pain and the inevitable loneliness that looms. Even when he is gone, she calls out to him through her open window and thinks to herself: “A copyist, a copyist!” (Ozick 165). Indeed, Rupert can only copy the world around him, adding his signature to a work that already exists. Once he and Puttermesser reached
the end of Eliot’s tragic marriage to Johnny Cross, reproducing their tragedy, the duplication is over in his view. But Puttermesser suffers from her own limitations by settling for someone so primitive, unequipped to be the soulmate she imagines, and lacking in any cultural similarities, just to avoid being alone. Furthermore, while she mocks Rupert as a copyist, she is guilty of the same offense by desperately trying to recreate the companionship reflected in Eliot’s letters to eliminate her own loneliness. Once again, Ozick shows the negative consequences of assuming any aspect of the role of a creator. Such a decision leads back to her central struggle, a tenet of her strict religious loyalty as a traditional Jew, which hinges on deferring imaginative expression to God alone.

Inevitable disconnectedness also weaves through Puttermesser’s remaining two chapters, which solidify other unfortunate dimensions of her alienation. In “Puttermesser and the Muscovite Cousin,” the heroine is even more entrenched within her ongoing isolation: “Ruth Puttermesser, white-haired, in her sixties – retired, unmarried, cranky in the way of a woman alone – had no premonition about the demise of the Soviet Union; yet she believed in collapse” (Ozick 170). As Puttermesser ages, her social withdrawal corresponds with this journey. Living alone in New York, she has no contact with any relatives in Russia, but Ozick previews Puttermesser’s imminent introduction to extended family: “Continents and seas lay between Moscow and New York, and a silence so dense and veiling that in the three decades since her papa’s death Puttermesser had almost forgotten she had Russian relations. They were remote in every sense. She never thought of them” (Ozick 171). She becomes aware of these relatives when her cousin Zhenya calls from Moscow, asking Puttermesser to host her daughter Lidia in New York. The most notable aspect of this chapter is the undercurrent of family ties that
temporarily retrieves Ozick’s heroine from isolation. Puttermesser invites Lidia to her home purely out of loyalty to her long-deceased father. She hears his pleas after Zhenya’s telephone call: “Save my child! But it was no longer Zhenya’s voice; it was the voice of Puttermesser’s papa, longing for the remnant of the lost” (Ozick 175). Although still alive, Puttermesser also exists among the lost, only connecting to her heritage through a stranger who distantly shares her blood. Lidia’s presence lifts Puttermesser from ancestral oblivion. When she sees old photographs and hears familiar family stories again, Puttermesser recollects traditions she had gradually forgotten. But with the final chapter “Puttermesser in Paradise,” this spiritual disconnection returns. In her late sixties now, Puttermesser is viciously murdered by an intruder and then transported to an afterlife that revives an alternative past. Reunited with her childhood sweetheart, Puttermesser enjoys the fullness of love, children, and family, only for this idyllic journey to fade into a vacuum. Thus, she finds herself stranded, nameless in a universe with little resemblance to the New York Puttermesser has always known. The story of Ruth Puttermesser ends with an overall feeling of nonexistence, where her disconnected obscurity delineates a life without value: “Puttermesser, whose name means nothing more troublesome than butter-cutter, walks through the white ash of Paradise, herself a shadow thought casting none, and longs for the plain green earth” (Ozick 235). Only in this final moment does Ozick translate the Yiddish definition of Puttermesser’s name, which amounts to a butter knife, further trivializing her humanity. Though Ozick presents Puttermesser’s saga with a humorous, often lighthearted tone throughout each chapter, even in the midst of great sorrow, the essence of marginalization remains a constant theme. As Puttermesser ages, she becomes more and more distanced from her Judaic heritage as her helpless isolation deepens. From a professional lawyer motivated to
maintain her Jewish roots to an eccentric recluse whose solitude escalates as she detaches herself from her Judaic heritage, Puttermesser is the epitome of cultural estrangement and an illustration of Ozick’s fervent belief in the spiritual damage that assimilation inflicts upon ethnic minorities.

Often considered the character with the closest resemblance to Cynthia Ozick herself, Ruth Puttermesser represents alienated Jewish identity in all its complicated nuances within the realm of American culture. Indeed, Ozick’s work emerges from expressing the intricate relationship between faith and societal exile through her own traumatic experience. Furthermore, because of these crucial, often misunderstood complexities, where Ozick fuses together Jewish history, philosophy, and customs, sometimes mystical, with themes of estrangement, critics focus more on certain inconsistencies without appreciating the ambitious depth of her artfulness. Since Ozick requires a degree of Judaic awareness to appreciate the richness of her narratives, this author’s prose also remains less accessible than the previously studied Jewish women writers. Unlike Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, and Grace Paley, Ozick’s stories, novels, and essays demand greater focus and commitment to recognize the masterfully layered depictions of stark Judaic alienation within mainstream America. In addition to exploring the social consequences of ethnic oppression, Ozick demonstrates that an aversion to diversity generates anguished desolation. Through the artful integration of her own alienated emotions, insights from enduring indifference and rejection because of her Judaic heritage, Ozick’s works supply critical and quite personal perspectives on the Jewish outsider’s anguished position in society’s margins. With the imaginative ability to explore different vantage points, Ozick offers a catalog of texts that thoroughly examine Judaic estrangement from multiple genders, dimensions, and settings to show the pervasiveness of cultural abuse against Jews. Whether through apathy or brutality, she
fearlessly confronts the complicated nature of ethnic mistreatment to ensure awareness, bringing such inhumanity to light with bold purpose. Furthermore, alongside the refusal to restrict her narratives’ viewpoint to womanhood alone, defiantly demonstrating an unwillingness to submit to gender stereotypes, Ozick establishes herself as a fierce feminist with some of the most unforgettable Jewish women characters in contemporary American literature. The combined effect of these many impressive characteristics is an author whose work deserves further celebration and detailed analysis. Cynthia Ozick belongs to an exclusive yet rightfully expanding group of important Jewish women writers because her masterful insights on cultural alienation in America justify extensive literary attention.
CHAPTER FIVE:
MARGE PIECY’S DISCOVERY OF HER JEWISH IDENTITY AND THE ULTIMATE HOMELAND

Marge Piercy, the last author of this study, represents a dynamic and quite complicated blend of the four Jewish women writers who precede her. Attuned to Judaic rituals, passionate about social justice, estranged by her mixed heritage, and tortured by an abusive relationship with her father, Piercy powerfully unites the prior authors with her own unique characteristics. Among her most significant qualities, Piercy’s dedication to telling stories about women’s lives, where she gradually infuses Judaism into these narratives over time, and her political perceptiveness distinguish the author’s fiction, poetry, and essays. In addition, one aspect that profoundly differentiates Piercy throughout each chapter of her life and the imaginative nature of her work is the continual, heartfelt search for an embracing space to call home. Woven into every area of Piercy’s world, a journey that began with an uneasy childhood in Detroit and propelled this author to an academic escape, are years of political activism and misogynistic romances. Through each experience, which she largely navigated on her own, Piercy seeks refuge from experiences of estrangement and otherness that she applies to reaching her publication goals. Even after enduring immense violence and serious wellness issues, from her father’s brutality to childhood health conditions to multiple tear-gassing episodes at political demonstrations, Piercy has persistently braved perilous territory to find a safe haven. Her writings demonstrate an intricate connection to a quest with the steadfast goal to find belonging. Although she remains an
intricate connection to a quest with the steadfast goal to find belonging. Although she remains an established writer whose extensive body of work consisting, in part, of seventeen novels and nineteen books of poetry earned some acclaim over several decades, little has been written on her unfailing objective to secure an all-encompassing retreat. Yet her novels Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), Summer People (1989), and The Longings of Women (1994) usher the reader on an expedition to the fundamental homeland each heroine individually envisions for herself. As a result, Piercy’s protagonists determine, and at times even insist upon, their own private corner in an otherwise alienating world.

Before she could create fictional settings that illustrate these unpredictable pilgrimages to eventual acceptance, Piercy withstood early experiences of trauma. Their harmful effects of emotional and spiritual estrangement extended well into her adult years, which she continues to address in her writing. Born on March 31, 1936 in Detroit, Marge Piercy grew up within a working class family that epitomized strife, animosity, and repudiation. The heart of this conflict derived from her parents’ ill-suited, often contemptuous relationship because Piercy’s mother and father lacked any cultural connections to each other. This profound divide between them only deepened their mutual scorn. Bert Bernice (Bunnin) Piercy, a religious Jew, and Robert Piercy, a non-practicing Presbyterian, displayed their antagonistic incompatibility at every turn, forcing their daughter to watch these unresolvable battles. In her autobiography titled Sleeping with Cats: A Memoir, Piercy extensively describes the viciousness that she witnessed

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1 Throughout numerous chapters of Piercy’s 2002 memoir, she narrates the malicious behavior that she observed between her parents. In fact, the toxicity of their relationship serves as a central lens, which informs Piercy’s own troubled romances and subsequent marriages. The portrait of her parents, with their obsessive lack of empathy for each other and thoughtless cruelty, is foundational to Piercy’s dysfunctional future connections, which contain certain similarities to this parental example. As Piercy weaves in detailed descriptions of her various relationships to different cats at every stage of her life, it becomes clear that these feline attachments provide more love and support than the majority of her interactions with other human beings.
between her parents, even stating: “My childhood was lived in the trenches of their war” (Piercy 33). With a comprehensive focus on these conflicts, Piercy describes the endless friction in detail, where she existed as peripheral to their unpleasant confrontations over most every topic. It should be noted that the title of Piercy’s memoir is particularly significant because the domestic cats that populated her life supplied the love and care that her parents proved incapable of providing. She meticulously describes her affectionate relationships to these various cats, all from a wide array of backgrounds, as her primary source of emotional connectedness throughout childhood and at every stage of her adult years as well. In contrast to the attachment that Piercy developed with these special felines, she existed as almost an unnoticed occupant in her parents’ home, where she mostly observed their dysfunctional relations. Piercy characterizes her mother as someone who possessed more of a liberal mind, believed in Judaic traditions, and yearned for sexual closeness. Her father, on the other hand, embraced Republican views, routinely mocked womanhood with sexist jokes and commentary, disparaged an adherence to religion, and outright dismissed any intimacy with his wife. Due to these troubling differences, Piercy rarely experienced peaceful moments with her parents, which intensified her continuous feelings of desolation. As a result, she spent more time with and received greater comfort from the enriching relationships Piercy fostered with the numerous cats that flowed through her life.

Unlike the feline tenderness that Piercy enjoyed, the future author endured immense rejection from her father despite continual efforts to earn his acceptance. In her memoir, Marge Piercy documents the problems she encountered whenever she attempted to develop any warmth with her father: “I adored my father too when I was little, but I think by the time I was seven, I had learned I could not please him” (Piercy 16). Alongside this stark realization, Piercy quickly
understood the danger that he posed to her safety. At any time, she could be the victim of his treacherous rage:

If he got angry enough, he kicked me, hard. The worst thing was being beaten with a wooden yardstick that leaned against the wall behind two doors that always stood open, where the mangle and the vacuum cleaner were kept. That continued until I took the yardstick and broke it into many pieces. (Piercy 36)

Through Piercy’s reflections on her father, she notes that his fury transcended any personal frustration toward her and derived largely from the miserable depth of unhappiness he appeared to bear concerning his life circumstances. According to Piercy’s theory, her father felt trapped and resented his responsibility to this family. She suspected that Robert Piercy wished to be released from the duties expected of him and return to a bachelor-style existence, which explained his relentless wrath: “It was a tamped-down hostility suddenly leaping out of control, a desire to be free of my mother and of me. A desire to be alone again [...] That desire to get rid of the burden of the two of us may have been behind his terrifying impatience” (Piercy 36).

Unfortunately, Piercy often served as a vulnerable target of her father’s ferocity and she coped with his indignation on a routine basis. In a 1997 interview with Gary Pacernick,² she discusses this difficult relationship and her father’s complete lack of support for her efforts to become a published author. By the time of this written exchange, Robert Piercy had been deceased for more than a decade. Perhaps that reality could explain Piercy’s matter-of-fact tone in describing her father’s apathetic response to her work. However, years of coming to terms with his misogynistic rejection of her might also clarify the detached quality of Piercy’s words: “He never

² For this piece titled “Interview with Marge Piercy,” the author wrote her answers to questions from Pacernick. He mostly inquires about Piercy’s poetry. However, Pacernick also asks Piercy to describe her connection to Judaism, how she translates her religious identity into her work, and the disturbing relationship with her father.
read any of my books. He was not interested. He did not believe a woman could produce any writing he would find worth his bother” (Piercy 84). Through the earliest moments of her childhood and at every stage of her focus to reach eventual publication, Robert Piercy consistently withheld love and affection from his only child. This punishing treatment, based on a misogynistic attitude that predated his daughter’s existence, laid a hurtful foundation for her future relationships with men. Moreover, it severely damaged Piercy’s ability to select appropriate spouses who cared about her happiness.

In addition to her father’s continual rebuffs and violent abuse, Piercy and her mother were also treated disrespectfully by his family because of their Judaic heritage, which worsened the author’s ongoing alienation. Robert Piercy grew up within a non-religious Christian household in which his relatives expressed intolerance for other faiths. Therefore, his relatives ridiculed Bert as well as Piercy, who, because of matrilineal descent, also identified as Jewish. Although she and her mother were members of this family, too, they never felt welcome during visits and encountered malice with each interaction. Piercy describes this torturous experience:

My father’s family was casually and relentlessly anti-Semitic, so neither my mother nor I was ever easy with them. We were always waiting for the next insult. We were always being observed to see if we would do something Jewish like crucify somebody in the backyard. If my mother or I ever laughed, or raised our voices, or used our hands in talking, there was a look that would pass between them that would silence us, as if we had been pushed under a glass bell. They never missed an opportunity to serve ham to us. My mother would eat it politely, although of course she never cooked it, but I would not. My grandmother had trained me too well. (Piercy 20)

This evident scorn over religious differences heightened the division between Piercy and her father, further cementing him and his side of the family as enemies. Like his relatives, Robert Piercy regarded Jews with disdain, which created a terrible barrier his daughter could never
overcome. In her collection of essays titled *My Life, My Body*,³ Piercy describes how her Jewish religion and female gender were immovable factors that prevented any meaningful relationship with her father. She states how these realities had always made it improbable to achieve the closeness that Piercy craved. Despite this knowledge, though, she still attempted to find ways to earn his approval, which often involved the deliberate display of courage in frightening situations. From mounting an elevated ladder to crossing a narrow bridge, Piercy welcomed such challenges to prove herself and surpass her father’s pessimistic vision of a Jewish girl’s worth:

I learned to overcome my fear and do foolhardy things never without thinking but without giving an outward sign of my fear. I did it partly in a futile effort to gain his respect, which could never be granted. That respect was never attainable because of my sex and because my mother and I were Jewish, and he was not. He was not anything in particular. He thought of himself as English, Anglo-Saxon, but he was only one quarter English; he was half Welsh and one quarter Scottish. (Piercy 3)

In essence, Piercy grew up in a home where one of her parents openly rejected her for reasons beyond her control. She lived with the perpetual understanding of her father’s incapability to fulfill the role of a supportive advocate or nurturer, though Piercy continued to hope these dynamics would somehow change.

Due to her father’s emotional and physical brutality, Piercy bonded more closely with her mother, but she often encountered psychological mistreatment that reinforced feelings of abandonment. As a young child, she would witness her mother’s tantrums and inevitably become

³ Piercy’s 2015 anthology of essays, with pieces written between the years of 1997 and 2015, offers an in-depth view of the author’s personal reflections, childhood abuses, and political opinions. In particular, her 1997 piece, which she calls “A Dissatisfaction without a Name,” provides autobiographical details of the author’s youth that lays the groundwork for her feminist views. She discusses how her father’s bigotry and sexism helped to fuel her commitment to telling stories about women and infusing Judaic tradition into her work. Subsequent essays within this collection discuss a variety of topics that matter immensely to Piercy, including her ardent pro-choice views on abortion, her opinions about the community alienation that occurs when cities undergo gentrification, and her passion for Cape Cod, the region that became her ultimate home.
the primary focus of this frustration. In her 1997 essay “A Dissatisfaction without a Name,” Piercy provides problematic details of that relationship: “My mother had a temper of her own [...] She had a far more vivid vocabulary of curses, some in Yiddish (used only with me), most in English [...] Her temper was released on me, of course, and on objects” (Piercy 3). Helpless, Piercy absorbed her mother’s misery throughout her youth and silently coped with these episodes that illustrated a genuine lack of maternal care. Furthermore, because she understood that her mother’s rage derived from Robert Piercy’s excessive control and refusal to acknowledge his wife’s needs, the little girl matured with an unwavering goal to achieve self-sufficiency: “It became clear to me sometime between the ages of thirteen and fifteen that economics was the bedrock on which any independence had to be built. If I couldn’t make a living, I would be as wretched as my mother” (Piercy 5). With this realization, Piercy decided that to attain her objective, she would have to earn a university degree. So she secretly signed up for classes in high school to prepare for this crucial transition, which infuriated her mother. Piercy explains this decision in her autobiography:

No one in our family had experienced higher education. When I enrolled in college prep in high school, instead of the commercial course, I did so without her knowledge or blessing. When she realized halfway through my freshman year what I had done, she was furious. I soothed her by taking typing courses. I am to this day a rapid typist, more than a hundred words a minute. My father’s only reaction was that he wasn’t going to pay for college: indeed, he didn’t. (Piercy 33)

An upsetting theme takes shape in Piercy’s portrait of her relationships with her parents. From a young age through her later high school years, Piercy’s best interests were never a consideration to the individuals entrusted with her welfare. What’s more, her mother’s enraged reaction to admirable self-motivation indicates the chaotic, psychological harm that Piercy endured in this
household. By implication, Bert Piercy would have preferred her daughter to suffer from the same limited resources that she experienced as a dependent woman.

Fortunately for the future author, she could turn to one parental figure who always provided unconditional love in an otherwise hostile and quite divisive atmosphere. Piercy’s grandmother Hannah Levy Bunnin Adler, whom the family hosted each summer in their Detroit home, offered the young girl unreserved adoration. A Lithuanian immigrant, twice widowed, and mother of eleven children, Adler supplied Piercy with her most meaningful link to Judaism. Sara R. Horowitz explains that Adler’s efforts offered her granddaughter an essential Judaic foundation: “Piercy developed her love of Judaism from her Orthodox, Yiddish-speaking maternal grandmother Hannah, daughter of a Lithuanian rabbi. Hannah gave Piercy her Hebrew name, Marah. Indeed, Piercy’s earliest memories of Jewish ritual are bound up with the scent of Hannah’s clothes and kitchen” (Horowitz 2021).

Without Adler’s attentiveness and dedication to passing down the family’s Judaic heritage, Piercy would not have been aware of this crucial aspect of her identity. In a 2015 interview with Terry Bisson, Piercy explains the important role that her grandmother played in the author’s life: “I was very close to my maternal grandmother [...] She gave me my religious education, gave me a strong sense of female-based Judaism, told me tales from the stetl and from her own difficult and hazardous life” (Piercy 52). Because of Adler, Piercy learned about her family’s struggles in a Lithuanian stetl (the Yiddish word for a small Jewish town in Eastern Europe), heard heart-wrenching recollections of relatives who were

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4 Horowitz’s 2021 article titled “Marge Piercy” appears in “The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women” as part of the Jewish Women’s Archive website. Horowitz provides a detailed biography of Piercy that examines each dimension of the author’s life, including her family, education, political activism, and engagement with Judaism.

5 Bisson’s interview titled “Living Off the Grid” is included in Piercy’s collection of essays My Life, My Body. This interview covers a range of topics about Piercy, which include her childhood, her life with third husband Ira Wood on Cape Cod, and her passionate background as a political activist.
murdered in the Holocaust, and discovered the horrific details behind her grandfather’s homicide in Cleveland, Ohio. Years before the Great Depression, he had tried to organize bakery workers into a union. But according to Adler, because of his radical politics and the loss of financial control such an endeavor posed, he became the victim of a murder-for-hire scheme by the bakery owners. Though Piercy does not connect her future political activities with her grandfather’s advocacy for the rights of working people, it is possible that her grandmother’s family stories helped inspire the author’s social justice efforts. Due to Adler’s loving attention, Piercy gained a strong sense of morals as well as an understanding of her Jewish ancestry. She also received a dedicated tenderness that her own parents never extended to her. Prone to conditions and sicknesses that included anemia, German measles, and sinusitis while also dealing with chronic eyesight difficulties, Piercy suffered from numerous health conditions as a child. Consequently, Bert and Robert Piercy expressed annoyance about their daughter’s physical weaknesses. But Hannah Adler did not shame Piercy for these limitations and, instead, adopted quite the opposite attitude. In her autobiography, Piercy describes Adler’s attentive and appreciative approach, where she looked at every issue, however formidable, from an uplifting, positive perspective:

My grandmother did not mind that my eyes had become weak and myopic and I must wear glasses. My grandmother thought I was beautiful. My grandmother thought I was brilliant. Whatever was wrong with me, Grandmother could produce someone she had known who had had the same complaint and had done something wonderful. (Piercy 30)

Because Adler did not view the little girl as a burden and always recognized her many strengths, Piercy enjoyed the unqualified love of this one adult in her life. During the summer months of her youth, Adler’s care helped build Piercy’s self-confidence in the midst of her own parents’ negligence.
Though Adler provided Piercy with affectionate support every summer, her absence during the year’s remaining months left the child to face great desolation largely alone. The structure of Piercy’s neighborhood served as a microcosm of personal alienation. Until the age of fifteen, Piercy, her parents, and her half-brother Grant, the son from her mother’s first marriage prior to the author’s birth, lived in a lower-income Detroit community that she describes as a checkerboard. It alternated between Black and white sections, where Jewish populations were scarce. Despite this invisibility, Piercy states that she had developed a friendliness with Black kids in her grade school, appreciating their protection from certain white classmates. Still, Piercy never quite felt she belonged in the area of Detroit that her family called home. She reflects on this state of otherness in her autobiography: “Being one of the only Jews in the neighborhood, I was not white and I was not Black, but something in between. Jews were not whites and were kept out of most neighborhoods in Detroit by covenants, as were the Blacks” (Piercy 43).

Alongside the neglectfulness that Piercy felt in her household, this cultural deprivation, where she had no contact with any other Jewish children, directly contributed to her loneliness. Since Piercy could not intimately relate to anyone around her, she adopted a segmented existence that spanned from school to her involvement in a neighborhood street gang:

My life was intensely compartmentalized. There was school, where I was a brain but not really white and badly dressed compared to other white girls. I hung out sometimes with boys in my neighborhood and then in the gang, and that was weird to the other girls. They all wanted to have a boyfriend, but they didn’t play with boys. Sometimes I still did. I always had boyfriends, although I did not care much for them. (Piercy 54)

Essentially, Piercy participated in a number of different groups that circulated around her, but without forging special ties to anyone. While she shared some aspects in common with different kids whom Piercy encountered, these qualities lacked cultural attributes, making them
more superficial. Therefore, Piercy did not develop in-depth, emotional connections with other children. Due to this deficiency, Piercy instinctively understood she could never attain genuine kinship, despite her various interactions and attempts to be social.

To compensate for this estrangement, Piercy turned to literature as consolation and connectedness, a nourishing way to break free from circumstances that left her feeling so powerless. Through reading, she gained agency against factors that limited her ability to enjoy authentic closeness. Indeed, entering other domains inspired Piercy’s imagination. While navigating the realities of gang life on her neighborhood’s streets, where she encountered the potential risks of rape and other forms of brutality that she never shared with her parents, Piercy retreated into fictional narratives for her own emotional survival. During this dynamic time of discovery, through the broad spectrum of her intellectual and streetwise growth, Piercy experienced great complexities. Now in the beginning stages of this journey to establish an independent existence, she also felt the blossoming pride of her Jewish identity in spite of the dangers such truthfulness could unleash:

At the same time, all my dreams came from books, and I was full of fantasies and invented tales of escape and high adventure, nothing like the ordinary grimy terrifying daily life of the streets I knew too well. I was a Jew, and thus an outsider. My mother was always saying, *Don’t tell anyone.* She was terrified that the Nazis would appear and carry us away to a concentration camp. My grandmother was proud of being a Jew. She practiced her religion openly and wore her identity in the world. When my grandmother learned that everyone, everyone she had known in Lithuania was dead, she grieved and mourned. I promised her I would always be a Jew, like her. (Piercy 56)

With these thoughts, Piercy describes how books supplied meaningful pathways to a more fulfilling life that outshone the material world around her. Furthermore, she weaves together the vast importance of reading and Judaism during these childhood years, key elements that helped
to define Piercy as an author numerous decades later. It should also be noted that even in her youth, Piercy understood the dangers of revealing her Judaic ancestry. Her mother regularly communicated this fearful obsession by invoking Holocaust imagery at the thought of anyone identifying their heritage. But because of the violence Piercy had already endured, whether at home or as a streetwise kid, she felt numb to the hazards of such honesty. In addition, her loyalty to Hannah Adler, Piercy’s role model of Jewish ethics, as well as the full acceptance of her outsider status nullified any uneasiness. Unlike her mother, Piercy thoroughly embraced her Jewishness and refused to be secretive. All of these facets are fused to form Piercy’s sense of herself and her complicated roots.

During this period, as Piercy delineated her Judaic awareness and literary inclinations with greater clarity, she also transitioned to a new Detroit neighborhood, exacerbating the eternal alienation she silently endured. Although Piercy’s parents achieved the ability to move their children into a more affluent and safer section of the city, Piercy detested this dramatically different environment:

>I felt isolated. The neighborhood into which we carried our battered old furniture was solid working-class, almost middle-class, with neat lawns and single-family homes. There were no gangs, no street-corner boys, no action in the alleys or the hallways of decrepit apartments: only houses side by side, and trees. (Piercy 62)

Even with all of the dangers that street life posed, the energy of social interaction, however precarious and artificial, linked Piercy to others. Therefore, this menacing stimulation had distracted her from feeling lonely. Without such instability, Piercy faced an uncomfortable solitude that she did not understand how to maneuver at first. Furthermore, her unusual collection of talents and interests, which involved shrewd self-defense skills and an obsession with reading books well above her age level, only reinforced Piercy’s otherness:
The things that aroused my enthusiasm – the novels, the poets, the analytical books that were tools to grasp the world – were not familiar to my peers. My dexterity with a knife and my ability to run like hell were not useful skills for impressing girls in my classes or boys I might date. (Piercy 66)

This new world of greater refinement intimidated Piercy because she did not share much in common with the teenagers now around her, further distancing the future author. Yet these considerable changes in circumstance also offered Piercy the space to develop her written voice, particularly since she now had a bedroom of her own: “These are the years when up in that room, I became who I was to be, began to write both poetry and fiction. The world – the intellectual and political and literary world – was opening up to me, although it was tremendously difficult for me to sort it out” (Piercy 69). Despite the lack of genuine understanding, Piercy had the comfort of her evolution as a writer alongside the knowledge that she could soon escape to college and finally obtain her freedom:

All through my senior year, I was counting time toward my flight. It wasn’t that I became detached or uninvolved with the people around me, but that I endured the boredom of high school. The war with my parents, the sense of being invisible – all as a temporary condition soon to be erased by my departure. I was walking through the maze of what was expected of me while putting my best effort into trying to understand what I read and trying to write. (Piercy 76)

During this stage in Piercy’s life, she battled a number of issues that directly emanated from her entrenched position as an outsider and the everlasting desire to forge her own passage as an author.

But Piercy’s quest to eliminate the invisibility that had plagued her would still take years to resolve, where the profound dimensions of chronic separateness, rejection, and obscurity continued to unfold in troubling ways. Yet Piercy never ceased in her intensive efforts to grow as a socially aware writer and thinker, always pushing to make her narrative voice heard. After
attaining a full scholarship to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1956, Piercy immediately proceeded to graduate school to advance her English studies. Then in 1957, she obtained a Master of Arts degree from Northwestern University funded by a fellowship. Piercy acquired her educational credentials entirely through her own resourcefulness. She never asked for her parents’ financial assistance and distinguished herself as a promising writer without their knowledge or interest. While winning prestigious poetry awards and becoming deeply involved with political groups that included the New Left and Students for a Democratic Society, Piercy still bore her parents’ disapproval for attending college. They refused to revise their limited view of her, which she carefully maintained with her secrecy, and pressured Piercy to conform to oppressed standards of womanhood. Indeed, neither of her parents encouraged her to accomplish more in life than they had done. According to their perspective, Piercy should have simply gotten an office position nearby right after high school: “My parents never gave up issuing propaganda for returning to their home, returning to Detroit, getting a nice pink-collar job. They kept expecting me to come to my senses and behave as they expected girls to” (Piercy 97). Because of her gender, Piercy’s aspirations were often dismissed by her parents due to their rigid notions of what women could achieve, even though she exhibited innate talent as a writer. Despite their objections, Piercy moved forward with her educational goals, never acquiescing to the constant criticism.

Although Piercy resisted her parents’ numerous attempts to control her, quietly asserting her own direction, she did not display the same inner strength with romantic suitors, often tolerating abuse for the sake of connectedness. In the midst of pronouncements for her own writing space, Piercy yielded to romantic overtures from domineering men who represented an
unhealthy pattern of relationships. Although she does not acknowledge any awareness of this recurring theme within her autobiographical works, Piercy regularly selected inappropriate romantic partners to secure elusive reassurances of love. Until meeting her third husband Ira Wood in 1976, whom she later married in 1982, Piercy became involved with men who routinely disregarded her writing dreams while assuming dominance over her. This toxic pattern emerged during Piercy’s freshman year in college after meeting another serious poet, just one year older than herself, who seemed to be the perfect match at first. Also from Detroit, this man had German-Jewish ancestry and shared her passion for writing. However, he ridiculed her poetry with such cruel derision that Piercy abandoned writing for a year: “I had been persuaded that since I did not write in imitation of Ezra Pound, what I wrote was worthless. It was too emotional, not in syllabics, too simple, too female” (Piercy 91). Like her parents, who discounted her capacity due to gender, Piercy’s first serious boyfriend disrespected her imaginative output in the context of her womanhood. This particular romance ended terribly because, similar to his contempt for Piercy’s poems, he showed indifference to her fears of pregnancy. As a result, she found herself in an urgent situation, faced with bearing an unwanted child: “I got pregnant that summer, and since I had no money and no access to an abortionist, and no intention of having a baby at eighteen and quitting college, I had to abort myself” (Piercy 90). In her autobiography, Piercy details how she ultimately handled this predicament. Rushing back to her parents’ house, she followed Bert Piercy’s instructions on what to do. With graphic detail, Piercy explains the frightening effort, which almost caused her to bleed to death. Throughout this endeavor, Piercy’s mother insisted that the family patriarch must never know the truth. So although Piercy felt weak from excessive blood loss, she pretended to be recovering from a toothache when her father
came home in the evenings. This inauthenticity for the sake of pleasing, though prompted by her mother, served as a basis to build upon in the majority of Piercy’s romances. Although her relationship with the poet ended soon after this makeshift abortion, she found herself with other men who similarly expected her contortions to meet their requirements for love. While Piercy never experienced such life-threatening circumstances again, she continued to select men who treated her with comparable scorn.

Following her troubled relationship in college, Piercy experienced two unhappy marriages to men who showed little respect or support for her writing, which gradually degraded initial feelings of intimacy and acceptance. In 1958, Piercy married Michel Schiff, a graduate student in particle physics whom she met during her studies at the University of Michigan. Jewish and an exchange student from France, he expected Piercy to conform to his parochial vision of marriage, eventually moving back with him to Paris and into an apartment his parents had prepared for the couple. Piercy disagreed with her new husband’s unilateral decision and disdainful views of her writing as a casual hobby, not an intense commitment. In her autobiography, she reflects on her mistake in choosing Schiff as a husband:

I thought I was smart because I was avoiding my mother’s mistake of marrying a Gentile, so I would not be living with anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, I married someone so different from me, as she had, so unable to perceive me, let alone understand me, that I was replicating the marriage of the cat and the dog, my parents’ fiasco. (Piercy 103)

Piercy quickly discovered that sharing the same religion did not forge the kind of closeness she had hoped. Subconsciously, she selected a husband with differences as dramatic as the divisions her parents endured. So she divorced Schiff the year after they wed and concentrated on finding publishers for her work. Now twenty-three, a recent graduate from Northwestern, and living on
her own in Chicago, Piercy struggled financially with a number of part-time jobs while also submitting her fiction and poetry. Despite the difficulties she encountered, Piercy did not regret leaving her marriage. She describes how becoming a wife ushered her into a new form of alienation, where her humanity vanished as she entered the labor force with this new identity: “The moment I became a married secretary, I experienced a loss of visibility. I would speak and no one would hear me. It was as if my voice had been swallowed by the air” (Piercy 116). Piercy felt powerless and unable to express her needs while linked in matrimony to Schiff. Releasing herself enabled Piercy to seize control of her life again and focus with even greater dedication on her writing.

Despite this essential lesson, where she discovered the painful estrangement that occurs when spouses lack similar values and refuse to offer mutual support, Piercy impulsively entered another union three years later. In 1962, she married computer scientist Robert Shapiro shortly after meeting him at a friend’s party. Although the marriage lasted almost twenty years, the psychological abuse caused Piercy a tremendous amount of anguish and self-doubt. In the midst of continual moves to a variety of diverse cities for Shapiro’s jobs and whims, including San Francisco, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and, finally, Cape Cod, Piercy withstood his demands for an open marriage. This meant a steady series of people, both women and men, streamed through their various households during these tumultuous years, some living with the couple for months on end. Piercy spends a considerable amount of time describing the myriad interpersonal dramas, sexual exploits, and rivalries that evolved due to their lifestyle alongside her political involvements protesting the Vietnam War and demonstrating against other social injustices. During that vigorous period, Piercy accepted the unconventional parameters that Shapiro set and
also engaged in various sexual liaisons of her own. But she always thought her husband, still the center of Piercy’s life as her primary relationship, wanted her to flourish as an author. Yet like Schiff, Shapiro regarded her writing as an unimportant leisure activity that could be cast aside for other priorities. Although Piercy achieved a book deal for her poetry with Wesleyan University Press in 1967 and progressively gained more attention, he did not view her work with any seriousness. The relationship deteriorated further just a short time later when Simon and Schuster bought her novel *Going Down Fast* (1969) through negotiations with Piercy’s literary agent Peter Matson. This title ironically encapsulated the state of Piercy’s marriage because she began to comprehend just how much Shapiro had underestimated her as an author: “I realized he had never really expected me to sell a novel. He kept saying not to believe it until I had a signed contract in hand. But I did believe it [...] I was beginning to be self-supporting as a writer” (Piercy 198). Piercy’s objective from so many years earlier, where she determined the need for her financial independence, had begun to take shape in the most fulfilling way possible. Even with this critical triumph, however, Piercy felt hurt by Shapiro’s unenthusiastic response to her writing achievements.

Once again, Piercy had linked herself to a spouse who lacked the capacity to celebrate her successes, choosing to punish the author with emotional detachment and disinterest instead. While she never explores the evident self-destructive pattern behind her selection of men, her spouses are reminiscent of Robert Piercy and his emotionally abusive treatment of her. Each of the first two men whom Piercy married displayed dismissiveness toward her dedication to writing, an indifference to her needs, and a general cruelty that evoked painful interactions with the initial male relationship of her life. Without consciously recognizing this reality, Piercy felt
drawn to mates who refused to view her creative destiny as valid while also diminishing her as secondary to their own aspirations. The constant disparagement of Piercy’s passion, her most treasured avenue of expressing herself, amounted to another form of personal rejection and further deepened the alienation that expanded over time within these hollow unions. Although Piercy recognized the futility of her marriage to Schiff soon after their wedding, it took much longer for her to accept the hopelessness of staying with Shapiro. More than a decade after the publication of her first novel, the strain of her increased fame and the influx of multiple romantic partners into their household caused the couple to drift apart. One advantage of the endless affairs and spectacle that defined Piercy’s world, however, is that it enabled her to meet Ira Wood through this tumultuous cycle of open relationships. A writer like herself, though fourteen years younger, Wood shared much in common with Piercy because of his intense commitment to the creative arts. Within months of her divorce from Shapiro, Piercy and Wood wed on June 2, 1982. Despite the heartaches of two failed marriages, Piercy’s desire to enjoy emotional closeness as well as sexual intimacy, which she documents in detail, overruled any caution.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the underlying motivation for all of these marital shifts in Piercy’s life derived from her persistent wish to find some form of belonging. She had finally established a permanent home in Cape Cod after her last move with Shapiro in the early 1970s. The escalation of health concerns due to years of smoking, gassing episodes at political rallies, and prior illnesses dating back from childhood necessitated that Piercy live in a cleaner environment. Therefore, through the transition of her marriage’s end to the blossoming romance with Wood, Piercy discovered a genuine life partner who could complete the place of refuge she had sought to secure for so long. By the end of Piercy’s autobiography, she describes the most
profound element of her bond to Wood, which centers principally on their mutual comprehension of each other as working writers. Though she tried to build this essential awareness into every prior relationship, Piercy could not foster that same level of connection with anyone else in her life before meeting and marrying Wood:

Two writers living together is considered difficult, but we have both found it better than being with people who don’t understand. I have been intimate with people who resented my writing, were jealous of it, were offended by it, tried to ignore it. Woody is a harsh critic of my work, and sometimes when he is particularly cutting, it creates considerable tension. But in the long run I find his criticism invaluable. He understands what I need. (Piercy 296)

Because Piercy now found a nurturing partner who embraced her dedication to writing, she achieved an acceptance that had been elusive until then. Even though Wood’s feedback could be difficult to hear at times, she enjoyed immediate access to evaluations that only another artist in her field could provide with the same depth and understanding. What’s more, this marriage embodied a cherished support of her writing that did not exist in any other union. She could incorporate her work into this relationship without its presence serving as an obstacle to the marital connection.

With the establishment of this powerful foundation, enabling her to put the melodramatic chaos of the previous decades into perspective, Piercy achieved a much more stable refuge from which to write. That pivotal transformation is apparent in the three novels examined within this study, where she steadily builds the journey to acceptance and the embracing of Judaic identity into her work. The secure, always hospitable form of a shelter that Connie Ramos, Dinah Adler, and Leila Landsman eagerly seek in their respective narratives of Woman on the Edge of Time (1976), Summer People (1989), and The Longings of Women (1994) could represent Piercy’s subconscious perception of a homecoming. Indeed, Janet Handler Burstein corroborates this
possibility as she discusses the complicated process that women writers of Jewish origin undergo in their fiction and memoirs. According to Burstein, Jewish American literature in the post modern age reflects an inherent idea of the self as unsteady and often disrupted. While this perspective influences all of contemporary Jewish writing, it has a specific, much more complicated effect on today’s women writers. Burstein believes the struggle for female authors of this ethnicity to understand the self becomes entangled with an urge to reconstruct family history, to recreate a world that no longer exists. Their literary efforts demonstrate the power of place for Jewish women authors and its commanding ability to mold that sense of self. Thus, Burstein concludes these threads serve as a consistent method for “reworking the discourse of home” (Burstein 801) in the literature of these women writers. So the journey toward variations of a homeland is intimately tied to an understanding of personal identity. That complex drive links the three main protagonists in Piercy’s above-mentioned novels, taking them on widely diverse travels that all conclude at versions of the same destination, customized to meet each heroine’s fundamental needs. Throughout these novels, an urgent wish to reconnect to a home base that offers comfort and unity is exhibited in numerous ways that range from nuanced themes to direct references. With each manifestation of this sanctuary, the common link for each character remains a focused determination to feel whole, thoroughly shedding that outsider status.

Due to this repeated representation of otherness that Piercy’s novels embody, it is feasible to surmise the author herself regularly experiences such estrangement. Sherry Lee Linkon

6 Burstein’s 2001 article “Recalling Home: American Jewish Women Writers of the New Wave” insightfully demonstrates the context of Piercy’s fiction, even though it does not specifically mention this author herself. Indeed, many of Burstein’s observations of the themes encompassing Jewish women writers can be applied to Piercy whose stories chronicle an emotional search to find refuge and ultimate security.
believes that is the case and closely investigates this concept. She examines Piercy’s Jewish identity in relation to a number of her recent works of fiction. In addition, she points out the general difficulty women faced in defining their affiliation to Judaism by the end of the twentieth century. Part of the issue involves a trend that pushed Jewish-American women away from traditional Judaism. Hence, Jewish womanhood in America encountered a shift, where individuals understood they had to frame their identities under different terms. The result enables secular, ethnic aspects to overtake what had once been a predominantly Jewish mindset. Linkon analyzes how this cultural deviation determines the approach some women writers adopt concerning the issue of Jewish identity within their works. She observes how Judaism is often relegated to the background in favor of themes related to gender and class. In Linkon’s view, Piercy employs this technique within her novels as well.

Yet over time, Piercy does bring Jewish identity to the forefront, making it a pivotal theme that her characters must address as they struggle with somehow fitting into the world around them. The experience of exclusion from mainstream life builds within Piercy’s fiction, a motif that begins even before she introduces a Jewish presence in her work. As Linkon observes, Piercy’s most famous work *Woman on the Edge of Time* confronts the isolation of otherness without integrating Judaism into any significant facet of the storyline. Connie Ramos is a Latina protagonist with absolutely no Jewish heritage. Still, Piercy positions her as distinctly separate from the American society that encapsulates and unjustly ensnares her in an asylum from almost the start of this novel. What’s more, Piercy’s exploration of Connie’s isolation provides a poignant precursor for her eventual and quite candid look at the division from society that Jewish women face. Linkon implies there is a parallel between the character of Connie and Piercy’s own
cultural estrangement. She also points out the double bind Jewish women must endure as not only outsiders within the dominant culture, but also within Judaism itself. By nature of these circumstances, Piercy has to locate her own definition of Jewish womanhood. Linkon claims that Piercy necessarily experiences “the complicated exploration of both internal and external ideas about the content and implications of Jewish ethnicity as well as recognition that the two sides of the paradigm can never be separated entirely” (Linkon 104). In fact, Linkon’s observation establishes the complex roles that both the outside world and inner notions play in Jewish womanhood. Particularly where an outer existence is concerned, the hunger to find a place to feel grounded while maneuvering potent otherness appears intimately entwined.

In addition to exploring the otherness inherent to womanhood, though without the Judaic component, Piercy’s novel also reflects the feminist viewpoint she had developed through her own experiences as well as by examining the larger world around her. During the 1950s and the 1960s, Piercy wrote a number of short stories and poems that explored aspects of women’s lives in a feminist context, but she could not find any interested publishers at that time. In a 1998 interview with John Rodden, which focuses on representing the perspectives of women, Piercy describes her frustration: “I did try to share my feelings about it. I tried to write about it. But other people didn’t like what I wrote [...] The feminist short stories and poems all had to wait until later to get published – after I had already been published on other subjects [...]” By that

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7 Linkon’s 1994 article titled “‘A Way of Being Jewish that is Mine’: Gender and Ethnicity in the Jewish Novels of Marge Piercy” looks at the author’s complicated representation of Judaic identity. Specifically, Linkon examines *Braided Lives* (1982) and *He, She and It* (1991), two novels that are not featured in this study, to understand how Piercy constructs the complex components of Jewish ethnicity. In Linkon’s view, Piercy nicely demonstrates how contemporary Jewish women writers weave gender, class, race, sexual identity, and other factors into an ever-changing fabric to define the Judaic experience in America.
time, the world had changed enough” (Rodden 137). Although she could not attract attention for work that contained a feminist awareness, Piercy did appeal to publishers with this particular novel because it qualified for the genre of speculative fiction. Within the same interview, she explains how this work could be differentiated from her prior feminist manuscripts: “I’ve always read a lot of science fiction, so I knew what I was doing. But when I wrote Woman on the Edge of Time, I was consciously placing myself in a particular tradition: the feminist utopian tradition” (Rodden 138). Because Piercy had mastered the components of an already established genre, she could weave her feminist sensibility into this novel without censure. M. Keith Booker notes another key angle that legitimized Piercy’s success in finally voicing her liberal viewpoint on womanhood: “Piercy’s work is particularly interesting because of its ability to maintain clear links to the tradition of feminist utopias while at the same time opening important dialogues with the masculine utopian classics and with the traditionally masculine dystopian genre” (Booker 339). In other words, Piercy needed to build upon an accepted literary category initiated by male authors for her feminist ideas to be favorably received. Since her prior writings on how women interact in society did not belong within an authorized classification, unofficially approved to standards set by patriarchal forces, her works were rejected.

Though Piercy never directly accues the literary establishment of silencing her feminist views, she does discuss her strategy for bypassing sexist limitations to depict the cultural

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8 Rodden’s 1998 article “A Harsh Day’s Light: An Interview with Marge Piercy” examines a wide array of facets of the author’s work. Piercy discusses the inspirations for her writing, including personal experiences as well as many of the political and feminist themes that motivated her fiction and poetry.

9 In his 1994 article “Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy,” Booker analyzes the author’s remarkable achievements writing science fiction, which he labels as a creative realm traditionally explored by men. Through close readings of Woman on the Edge of Time and He, She and It, he also notes how Piercy artfully blends dystopian and utopian concepts to create her own vision for a better world.
alienation of women in American society. In a 2014 interview with Elton Furlanetto, Piercy methodically illustrates her treatment of utopia to express feminist concerns:

I set out with Woman on the Edge of Time consciously in the utopian tradition. The utopias that men have created are very rigid, everything very well defined, often a caste system, etc. I am more interested in the types of utopias women have created. Basically women’s utopias have been places where what women do not have can exist – i.e., a sense of community, since many women are isolated while raising their children. A place where women are not punished for their sexuality, a place where raising children is communal or quasi-communal, a place where in old age people are respected and taken care of. A place where a lot of the tasks that are denigrated in this society are respected. (Furlanetto 421)

Piercy’s expansion upon the parameters instituted by male authors enabled her to showcase key aspects of feminism that she could not express without this endorsed framework. Through her vision of a world that allows women to flourish without the divisions of class, age, maternal roles, and other factors, Piercy offers a hopeful outlook which completely eliminates the societal alienation women endure. In Piercy’s utopia, women from a diverse array of backgrounds unite. The debilitating partitions that American culture has devised are nonexistent. Therefore, every woman can enjoy full acceptance, a welcoming sanctuary, and feelings of connection in Piercy’s universe that remain out of reach in reality.

The theme of yearning for home, a refuge from cultural cruelty, dominates Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time, which happens to be one of the first novels of her career. Although Judaism only plays a peripheral role, if any, in this work, unmistakable othering occurs from the start. Piercy immediately shows Connie’s unfair fate when she’s incarcerated in a mental

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10 Furlanetto’s 2014 article “‘There Is No Silence’: An Interview with Marge Piercy” concentrates on the author’s science fiction works, primarily Woman on the Edge of Time and He, She and It. Furlanetto discusses the relevance of both novels as well as the elements of social action that Piercy weaves into each piece. In this conversation, Furlanetto obtains detailed answers from Piercy on her political passions and how her novels that navigate this topic in all of its complexities are the most important to her.
institution for attacking her niece Dolly’s abusive boyfriend. Courageously, she stands up to him and his violent plan to abort Dolly’s pregnancy. As a horrific consequence, Connie receives the full force of his brutality. Knocked unconscious, she awakens to find herself constrained to a bed in a New York City hospital, helpless and alone:

> Sometimes she slipped into a hot, muggy doze and sometimes the pain from her back or her rib or her mouth tore through her sleep and she woke wild with grief and wept. “Please, please, please come. Please let me out. Someone. Please!” No response came. That was madness. To weep and cry out and curse and scream, and it was as if she had done nothing. She was dozing in that feverish half-sleep without rest or relief, when the door banged open. Two attendants came in and untied her. (Piercy 12)

The utter inhumanity of Connie’s treatment, where she has no rights and cannot represent her circumstances to anyone because her perspective contains no value, reverberates in Piercy’s description. No amount of pleading influences a single member on the hospital’s staff to come to her aid for an extended period of time, even though she is obviously battered. To be sure, Connie gets handled like a wild animal, never granted the respect that a thirty-seven year old working woman who strives to lead a quiet, independent life deserves. Furthermore, because of her bravery, an overpowering instinct to protect her vulnerable niece, she is severely punished through this abrupt, unjustified kidnapping from her home, which she can never return to again. In addition, she gives up her security to fulfill a moral obligation to Dolly and continually suffers for it at the hands of society as if she’s a common criminal, an assessment that couldn’t be farther from the truth.

While keenly realizing the complete unfairness of this institution’s conduct toward her, Connie seeks a clear pathway back to her apartment, experimenting with different strategies to achieve her goal. At first, she relies on the hope that Dolly will somehow free her, successfully
convincing the administration of the flagrant mistake it has made in holding her captive. During this time, she feels confident that Dolly will save her by telling the truth about the circumstances that led to Connie’s dreadful commitment. In fact, she fantasizes about her homecoming, despite the fact that her tiny unit is a depressing hovel, not an inviting residence. But the reality of Connie’s drab apartment does not matter at this point. It is a welcome alternative to confinement within the mental asylum and represents Connie’s aspiration to freedom. Thus, she may reexperience a safe place and feel in charge of her life again:

How she would celebrate her release! Her dingy two rooms with the toilet in the hall shone in her mind, vast and luxurious after the hospital. Doors she could shut! A toilet with a door! Chairs to sit in, a table of her own to eat on, a TV set that she could turn on and off and tune to whatever program she wanted to watch, her own bed with clean sheets and no stink of old piss. Her precious freedom and privacy! (Piercy 20)

Although Connie’s small apartment certainly contains flaws that infringe on her overall privacy, it still offers great comfort in comparison to the ward she’s forced to inhabit now. By being home once more, Connie can recover her humanity and retrieve precious control over her existence without interference.

The quest to regain her rights as well as access to her modest home mingles with Connie’s continual reflections on her past. Piercy weaves an emotional narrative that demonstrates the years of societal mistreatment Connie has endured. Indeed, this descriptive portrait provides contextual information of the heroine’s complex history that dates back to her youth as a first generation American born of Mexican immigrants. Connie’s financial struggles, various romantic difficulties with men who are routinely straddled with rage in addition to misfortune, and eventual interactions with drugs relate to her severe lack of cultural opportunity. The most tragic result of these circumstances is Connie’s eventual loss of her only child.
Angelina to a foster home. Explained in fragments that resemble Connie’s scattered thoughts and endless mental suffering at the asylum, the narrative shares this ultimate calamity. As the pieces gradually come together, the novel describes a fateful bout of depression during which Connie strikes her daughter in a narcotic-driven fury. This one instance of violence in an otherwise kind and gentle existence forever defines Connie with a distortion she can never overcome, especially since it resulted in her commitment to this same institution years earlier. Because she is saddled with a previous stay that had also mischaracterized her, Connie must confront these circumstances in her current incarceration while also looking for a way to achieve freedom.

As Connie navigates complicated negotiations with a system that degrades while also enduring traumatic memories that constantly haunt her, she feels a nostalgia for home. The reality of its obvious imperfections and location in an overcrowded, somewhat questionable neighborhood are immaterial. All that matters is the apartment’s capacity to shelter her from the humiliation and powerlessness of this present captivity. In fact, Connie’s intense desire for the former protection she once possessed in her apartment entwines with remembrances of past afflictions. Her unit had been a secure place she could always enter to heal from every savage incident in her life. Collectively, these moments include the violence inflicted on Connie by her former husband Eddie, the need for an emergency hysterectomy after undergoing an unsuccessful abortion, and the arduous trudge home while feeling this horrible loss of her womanhood. Connie acknowledges this truth in the tapestry of her running meditation as she observes: “Home was at least a refuge, as a mouse must feel about its hole” (Piercy 37-38). Such an insight demonstrates Connie’s impression of her own insignificance. Because of the litany of troubled experiences that repeatedly thrust her to the side as an outcast, someone to be discarded
without a second thought, she has internalized that sense of irrelevance. Yet in her determination to regain that freedom, however humble and unassuming, this simple, bare-bones residence achieves a much higher and more precious purpose. It becomes a more meaningful barrier from the world’s continual savagery against her.

In contrast to the cramped living conditions Connie accepts as normal and longs for so deeply during her confinement, she discovers a welcome alternative from the future. Shortly before her incarceration and throughout this entire episode, where she remains locked in the hospital’s various wards, Connie develops an unexpected friendship with a woman named Luciente who exists in the year 2137. Interestingly, Luciente initiates this contact because Connie embodies what the future defines as a “catcher” since her mind is deemed receptive. At first, Connie finds the exchanges between them suspicious and unnerving. She constantly wonders about Luciente’s true motivations due to this unanticipated attention and the overall strangeness of the circumstances. Furthermore, Connie’s consistent experience of abuse causes her to be instantly apprehensive despite the warm affection Luciente offers from the start. But as their relationship develops, Connie feels more comfortable with Luciente and mentally travels back to her world.

As a resident of the communal town of Mattapoisett, Luciente shows Connie what it means to thrive in an intimate community that embraces diverse voices, equalizes gender differences, and celebrates individual talents. During Connie’s mental travels to Luciente’s alternate universe, she also gets introduced to a kind of familial living situation that respects privacy while never closing off togetherness. What confuses Connie the most is the notion that relatives have the flexibility to enjoy independent retreats from each other, even while sharing
certain ties at the same time. Unlike Connie’s solitary life before her hospitalization, when she had been married with her young daughter years earlier, the family residence had no such built-in borders. So she expresses her surprise to Luciente during one of her first tours of the town.

“Luciente looked mildly shocked. ‘We each have our own space! Only babies share space! I have indeed read that people used to live piled together.’ Luciente shuddered. ‘Connie, you have space of your own. How could one live otherwise? How meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study?’” (Piercy 64). The portrait of home according to Luciente’s description as well as her lived reality provides a much more nurturing and nourishing atmosphere than anything Connie has ever enjoyed.

Furthermore, Connie becomes acquainted with a different, much more freeing model of motherhood that completely eradicates isolating the new parent with her offspring to cultivate societal interaction. During the previously mentioned interview with Furlanetto, Piercy outlines this feature as a crucial difference between contemporary demands on American mothers and her utopian imaginings. To show how motherhood could unify women, not segregate them into painful isolation, Piercy constructs a society within Luciente’s world, where each person shares these caretaking duties. Elaine Orr discusses this concept, which removes the alienation that often occurs when women must prioritize their babies’ needs over personal desires for social connectedness: “Piercy’s creation of excessive social mothering and her interruption of biological reproduction amplifies the material history of mothering and opens the possibility of social reproduction along mothering lines” (Orr 67). Orr pinpoints a key element of Piercy’s

11 Orr’s 1993 article titled “Mothering as Good Fiction: Instances from Marge Piercy’s ‘Woman on the Edge of Time’” examines how the author treats motherhood in her science fiction novel. She also explores the context of what it means to be a mother within a story that focuses primarily on intrusive medical technologies that do not
vision of a utopian womanhood, demonstrating how women do not have to sacrifice their need for social companionship while they are involved in family matters. This aspect of motherhood, which so often separates women from others while also preventing them from the fulfillment of their own goals, is a crucial aspect of Piercy’s feminist thought. For her own life, she made the decision to undergo a sterilization procedure late in her marriage to Robert Shapiro because she felt that family responsibilities would interfere with her writing goals. Piercy describes this choice in her 2002 autobiography *Sleeping with Cats: A Memoir*: “I have never regretted taking charge of my body. I did not want children. I never felt I would be less of a woman, but I feared I would be less of a writer if I reproduced. I didn’t feel anything special about my genetic composition warranted replicating it” (Piercy 216). While Piercy made this controversial decision for herself, she also recognized that the majority of women do not select such an extreme option. So she envisioned a world within her novel where this perplexing binary is nonexistent, imagining a society enriched by an engaged motherhood of involved parental figures. This reconfiguration of domestic life embodies Piercy’s ideal image of a place of acceptance, an embracing sanctuary that brings women together to take mutual responsibility of the young rather than cause divisions.

To Piercy, home also represents a personal space designed for a range of creative activities to flourish uninterrupted. Moreover, she redefines isolation to contain positive connotations, inviting each resident to take advantage of an opportunity to concentrate on the continual development of their skills. Quite unlike Connie’s tiny mouse hole with its implied discomfort, the home envisioned by Luciente’s culture embraces being alone as a positive action involving procreation. Orr analyzes these seemingly disparate elements to discuss the complexity of feminism as Piercy presents it in this dystopian/utopian work.
that serves to better the individual for membership within the larger society. Indeed, the societal structure in which Connie lives is brutal and fails to offer sustenance or support to anyone outside the dominant ruling class. M. Keith Booker specifically analyzes how Connie’s reality is a place of constant punishment in contrast to Luciente’s version of the universe. He points out how a diverse range of cultures exists quite productively in Luciente’s community, which is quite unlike the ostracized treatment Connie endures as a member of an ethnic group considered to be on the outskirts of society. Booker states: “All citizens of Mattapoisett are valued and loved, and all are treated equally regardless of race, gender, or other differences. In short, this society accepts and even welcomes precisely the differences that have marginalized Ramos in her own world” (Booker 340). The irony that in a different time and place Connie would have experienced a much more accepting environment, drastically improving the quality of her life, proves the cultural mistreatment goes far beyond any individual. At the same time, it shows the demeaning effect of such abuse at the personal level that Connie represents.

Although these obvious systemic boundaries ensure that Connie’s ultimate search for the nurturing home she envisions remains elusive, she never stops striving for a household that fulfills her most fervent desires. Much later in the novel, during Connie’s eventual and dismally unsuccessful escape from the hospital, she does her best to run away on foot through the night. She feels desperate to avoid the asylum’s intention to implant wiring in her brain designed to make her submissive and under control. Her lack of violence and consistently reasonable behavior does not factor into the institution’s rigid decision to violate Connie, effectively turning her into a monkey for their experiments with this new technology. Even through Connie’s frantic rush to protect her humanity, asserting freedom from such oppression, she still notices the homes
she passes in her bold escape, silently yearning for each one. Piercy describes the neighborhood that Connie views in this frenzy with chopped prose, a breathless feel within every phrase. These homes are delineated through their associated machinery, ranging from the television sets and telephones to kitchen appliances and motor vehicles. Then the narrative moves to suggest the presence of multiple children with a vacuum cleaner in operation as the television blasts different game shows. There is no mention of an actual woman directing this active household, but Connie assumes that is the case as she absorbs this repetitive setting that briefly surrounds her as she runs away:

She had envied such women, she had strived to become one. Marrying Eddie, she had hoped to be made into such a housewife in such a house. She had hoped she was being practical at last with the steady man, the steady income…Anything to be safe. Anything to belong somewhere at last! (Piercy 249)

Intriguingly, the ideal home in Connie’s world is a flurry of chaos, where the noise of technological mechanisms fills the air and productive womanhood involves the completion of chores that keep the household afloat. To Connie, the goal of belonging in a secure place means so much more than any personal growth. She wants to meld with the mechanisms that ensure the home’s existence. Indeed, it is better to be locked in a house that requires constant cleaning due to its many inhabitants than to be committed to an institution. In certain ways, she molds herself to this exalted level of society so closely that she cannot discern the troubling similarities between the two kinds of homes – domestic and institutionalized. The truth is that Connie falsely glorifies one over the other in part because of the low cultural expectations she has accepted without question for her whole life, even after seeing the inspired possibilities Luciente’s world exemplifies.

During her entire effort to flee the asylum and find her way back home, Connie
encounters numerous difficulties during this quest for freedom. Ozick provides painstaking details of the multiple challenges that her heroine faces. From finding food along the highway to coping with the physical ache caused by hours of walking without sufficient shoes, Connie’s struggles display the courageous nature of her daring departure. Unfortunately, all of this extensive planning ends up in colossal failure. A suspicious clerk at the bus station alerts the authorities and she is picked up within minutes to be returned to the hospital ward. Once Connie is locked up again, she gets regular visits from one of the doctors. Alongside his attempts to soothe her with compassion, Dr. Acker actively tries convince Connie that she will benefit from having her brain embedded with an electrode. According to him, this surgery can transform Connie into a productive member of society. In desperation, she exclaims, ‘‘I want to go back to my life!’’ (Piercy 256). But Dr. Acker does not accept her honest proclamation, insisting the hospital has the tools to ensure that she can function without the risk of any future commitments to the ward. Essentially, her rights are nonexistent. This surgeon confirms that very mentality when he warns her not to resist.

But the institutional pressure on Connie to acquiesce and abandon any plan to go home does not stop her next plot, which she devises with Luciente’s constant encouragement. Although she ultimately cannot escape the implantation, accepting the horror of it with a numb determination to survive, Connie still enlists Dolly’s help to get a furlough for the Thanksgiving holiday. Eventually, Dolly convinces her father Lewis, who is also Connie’s brother, to give the hospital permission. But once Connie is at her brother’s ostentatious home, she discovers this household has many similarities to the hospital ward, where she remains locked up and not free to move around. Furthermore, Lewis treats her as the help, demanding she assist his wife Adele
in the cooking of this extensive meal. Sadly, Connie does not measure up to Adele’s expectations and receives constant criticism. But this tension has no effect on Connie’s delight at all of the food choices displayed within the family’s refrigerator. “Each time she opened the door to that paradise of golden possibilities, she felt buffeted by choice. Deciding was so difficult she could hardly move her hand. Too much. She felt like weeping with joy” (Piercy 348). Connie’s intense desire to be sheltered in a real home again allows her to overlook the abusiveness of her relatives. Even as family members are coarse and treat Connie heartlessly, never showing any interest in her precarious circumstances or questionable imprisonment at the hospital, this protagonist offers no real protest. Likely toughened by the stresses of asylum life and affected by the draining drugs in her system, she barely notices the many people within Lewis’s large household. Moreover, Connie is so fixated on finding a pathway to some sort of refuge from the hospital that she could not care about any petty behaviors toward her at this point. Yet Piercy invests the time in demonstrating the toxic nature of Lewis’s family, who fearfully sit around him, silenced amidst a luxurious display of food Connie has helped to prepare as Adele’s indebted slave.

In the end, Connie never sheds the institutional profile that has haunted her existence for years. Yet she never stops considering alternative solutions to overcome her cruel incarceration. Going home stays at the forefront of her thoughts, even after Connie’s mind becomes so cruelly contaminated with the hospital’s intrusive wiring. Piercy illustrates how the system prevails over individual choice, successfully preventing one woman from her rightful wish to have her own safe place in society. Indeed, the otherness that invites celebration in Luciente’s time crushes Connie into somewhat of a submission, even as she continues to fight, however subtly. The novel
closes with Connie desperately pouring liquid poison from Lewis’s greenhouse business into the staff coffee pot at the hospital. She views this move as her revenge against the endless imprisonment that traps her. Piercy leaves Connie’s final act in a murky state, never explaining if it actually harms anyone at the hospital. But the passive aggressive nature of Connie’s behavior epitomizes her resentment. It reflects the utter misery that comes from being marginalized without the opportunity to carve an ideal home for herself largely due to societal rejection of her ethnicity. The frenzied chaos that Connie experiences in her quest to find safety and security directly correlates to Piercy’s own state of mind as she wrote this novel. At the time, her marriage to Robert Shapiro was crumbling due to his cruelty and the incessant turmoil caused by the flurry of multiple affairs that flowed through their lives together. In her autobiography, she explains this emotional confusion and how the scenes devised within the mental institution correspond to her own feelings of frightened instability:

I wondered if I were going crazy [...] Now I wondered if I had lost my sanity, because I was confused by the reality of my life and relationships. I was having trouble believing what I was enduring. I was tearing apart inside. My pain made me feel broken, demented. (Piercy 238)

The suffering that Connie endures is an authentic illustration of Piercy’s own struggles with the uncertainty over her home’s permanence. That vulnerability comes across with powerful resonance, demonstrating why Woman on the Edge of Time has rightfully distinguished itself as one of Piercy’s most important and memorable works.

When Piercy advances to the next novel featured in this study, published thirteen years later and exploring the same powerful theme of achieving a secure home base, she offers a much more hopeful tone. While Summer People lacks the political focus and powerful subject matter that make Woman on the Edge of Time so compelling as well as emotionally poignant, this work
concentrates on domesticity at its core. However, Piercy argues that her novel does more than just explore the security of finding a safe refuge at home because it also sharply critiques societal divisions and their damaging effect on communities. In a compilation of interviews with several other women authors, she describes how her work of fiction derived from witnessing the destructive impact of affluent part-time residents on Cape Cod. During a walk around Wellfleet, the Cape Cod town where she lives, Piercy noticed how wealthy summer residents demolished an eighteenth-century home so that it would resemble a New York loft: “The image somehow adhered to a number of stories I had heard over the years and I began imagining dealing with that class and world-view gap between the summer people and the residents of a resort area” (Piercy 25). The infusion of money into a given community concerns Piercy and it is a topic that she scrutinizes within her essays as well. What’s more, she argues that the process of refurbishing a neighborhood, one that formerly reflected the residents who made that area unique in meaningful ways, causes an immense disservice to the land itself. In her essay “Gentrification and Its Discontents,” Piercy describes the individual transformations of each of the former cities where she once lived, which consistently involved the systematic erasure of diversity in favor of generic representations of capitalist luxuries. She concludes this piece by looking closely at the modifications of Wellfleet that have evolved over the years. As a consequence, much of the region’s natural beauty is monopolized by extravagant homes that are empty for half of the year. Her attitude toward Cape Cod deviates to a substantial extent from those intent on modernizing the region:

12 The 1989 article “What I Do When I Write...” features Piercy among the eleven women authors who discuss their latest works and their own approaches to creating vivid narrative worlds.

13 This essay is included in Piercy’s 2015 anthology My Life, My Body.
I love the land in a very dogged and hardworking way. I am tied to it. My mother and my dead cats are part of the soil. I’d like to end up that way [...] I worry about the future of the Outer Cape that is in danger of becoming a series of ghost towns in the season that used to be the busiest for local people. (Piercy 21)

Piercy’s distress over the detrimental evolution of her Cape Cod community comes across in Summer People. This novel’s examination of an urgent desire to find sanctuary contains the continuing backdrop of remodeling only to conceal psychological fractures.

In order to appreciate Piercy’s complex depiction of this quest to establish a place of refuge, however, the almost pornographic nature of the central three characters’ sexual relationship must be unpacked and, thus, put to the side. Piercy describes an unconventional romance between Dinah Adler, an aspiring musician and widow, and her married neighbors Susan and Willie DeWitt, often providing the most uncomfortable details of their encounters. These two households are directly beside each other, even sharing the same driveway. So their extensive intimacy has many layers that transcend the sexual, stretching to the day-to-day life in this corner of Cape Cod, and reaches a claustrophobic feel. Unlike Woman on the Edge of Time, which stays in Connie’s perspective throughout the novel, Summer People alternates between Dinah, Susan, Willie, and Laurie, another neighbor in this tight-knit community. Indeed, despite Dinah’s gradual elevation above the others, especially as the story deepens to a greater spiritual focus, the large number of characters extends beyond the various points of view within rotating, dedicated chapters that often dilute the essence of this novel. However, an understanding of Piercy’s own marital struggles provides poignant insight into the often melodramatic and highly sexualized predicaments that she weaves together in this work, which examines estrangement from multiple perspectives. The wide array of voices eventually unify to support Piercy’s own
conclusions about the problematic nature of welcoming numerous romances into an intimate relationship.

Even with this sustained upheaval, Piercy manages to tell a cohesive story about the continued development of Dinah’s overwhelming need to make a place for herself and find acceptance. Furthermore, Piercy openly weaves Judaism into Dinah’s quest, showing her eventual homecoming to the Jewish culture. Therefore, home and Jewishness become entwined for Dinah. In fact, Rosie Rosenzweig discusses the integral role of Judaism that emerges in Dinah’s evolution. Rosenzweig particularly looks at how Dinah’s religion becomes a source of comfort. Through the turmoil that eventually erupts in her charged romance with Susan and Willie, where an argument over the presence of a controversial neighbor infiltrates their closeness, Dinah turns to her Jewish roots for solace. Rosenzweig observes: “As she attempts to resolve the issues of her life, she uses the Jewish rituals before the Day of Atonement to help her. Tashlich, the ritual of casting one’s sins upon the waters in the form of bread crumbs to Dinah now has new meaning at the turning point of her life: should she outgrow the unconventional relationships she had as a mask to inner confrontation and move ahead?” (Rosenzweig 84).14 According to Rosenzweig’s reading, the sexual entanglements Dinah shares with her married neighbors represent a distraction from self-discovery, which arrives through an inevitable recognition of Judaism’s ultimate importance in her life. It takes removing herself from the drama that fuels the long-standing romance with her neighbors for Dinah to grow, even

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14 In her 1998 article titled “Marge Piercy’s Jewish Feminism: a Paradigm Shift,” Rosenzweig delves into Piercy’s fiction and poetry through the framework of Judaic spirituality. She sees Piercy’s work as an avenue for redefining Jewish feminism by daring to surpass its traditional borders. Through a methodical survey of selected novels, Rosenzweig points out how Piercy blends Judaic practice, feminist ideas, and contemporary world politics to illustrate the rich possibilities that the future of Judaism holds.
embracing her cultural differences from the community she has called home over an extensive period of time.

Although Dinah feels this corner of Cape Cod is where she belongs, of the three individuals in this complex love triangle, which blurs the two households, she embodies an outsider on multiple levels. Unlike Susan and Willie, Dinah has no marital ties and she also happens to be the only Jewish person in this turbulent, three-way relationship. Years earlier, Dinah had come to Cape Cod with her much older husband Mark, an acclaimed poet. While he had been Jewish, too, he did not view himself as a practicing Jew, focusing much more on his art. The fact that he had a shared cultural background with Dinah enabled her to feel connected to her roots, however peripherally. His death after a long illness ushers an unexpected, decade-long chapter into Dinah’s life, where she finds comfort and companionship in the arms of her next-door neighbors while a spiritual need quietly develops within her. She allows herself to be absorbed into the DeWitt’s world, decorating Christmas trees with them and virtually abandoning the few Jewish rituals she had once integrated into her marriage with Mark.

A sudden rift with Susan causes the threads of Dinah’s Jewish past to resurface, eventually finding a presence in her home. It is intriguing to note that Dinah’s interaction with Judaism often hinges on external forces, not an inner need to fuse Jewish customs into her life no matter the circumstances. She only turns back to Judaism once her bond with Susan starts to unravel over a disagreement that dredges up layers of unspoken tension. They initially fight about Tyrone Burdock, a wealthy, entitled neighbor with a nearby summer home, who expects Susan to tend to his property as if she works for him. Once the anger between the two women explodes to the level of personal attacks, Willie also begins to withdraw from Dinah. Therefore,
her remaining connection to the couple is her friendship with their young adult son Jimmy. He also has a curious sexual interest in her. After addressing the inappropriateness of a romantic relationship, Dinah acquiesces to his campaign to become her roommate. She then allows him to move into her house while also expanding it with a substantial renovation. Meanwhile, throughout all of the sudden changes in the two households, Dinah journeys further into herself and embraces her Jewish background even more. Essentially, Dinah erupts from the nontraditional arrangement she shared with Susan and Willie to forge her own path to a newly shaped home based on Jewish ritual and observance. Though her intense concentration on Judaism is a direct outcome of this upsetting conflict with Susan and Willie, it plays a profound role in her ability to heal nonetheless. Unlike Connie, whose ethnicity remains a hindrance to attaining the refuge of her dreams, Dinah’s ties to Judaism strengthen her as well as provide an emotionally nourishing pathway to the personal space and the eventual family that she desires.

As Dinah proceeds on this spiritual route, her focus on developing the right kind of home life evolves from a growing need to reconnect with the Jewish traditions of her youth. From the beginning pages of Piercy’s novel, Dinah’s lack of wholeness due to an inactive Jewish core weaves through the heroine’s thoughts. Even as she cherishes the intimate closeness of her relationship with Susan and Willie, Dinah experiences a religious isolation at the same time. “Sometimes Dinah felt lonely and strayed in her Jewishness, out here on this sand spit in the woods among gentiles” (Piercy 20). Dinah’s powerful yet silent alienation is not something she ever explains to the couple. Her cultural estrangement hovers above without Susan and Willie ever noticing. In fact, they automatically herd her into their own rituals, even while knowing that she has a different religious identity. Nevertheless, Willie brings her with him each year on a trek
deep into the surrounding woods to chop down the perfect tree for Christmas. Then she is expected to decorate this chosen tree with them in their home, an observance she only accepts because of the intimate relationship they share together. Although Christmas is not her holiday, Dinah never objects to the inclusion, which entirely overlooks her spiritual diversity. To maintain the attachments that she has viewed as nurturing for so long, Dinah compartmentalizes her Jewish identity.

For the sake of preserving the peace of their bond and the loving sense of community between the two homes, Dinah never mentions the guilt she struggles with at abandoning her Jewish core. Frequently, she thinks about her father, a Holocaust survivor, who died more than twenty years earlier of a heart attack when Dinah had just entered her teens. Despite the many intervening years that have passed by, Dinah continues to feel a powerful connection to her father. It translates into a fervent yearning to please him by keeping their Jewish heritage afloat by eventually bringing her own children into the world:

He had given her a sense that being a Jew was something painful, powerful and radiant she must carry forward. When he talked about the past, it was always in terms of what she must tell her children. He was older than the fathers of her friends, who would sometimes think he was her grandfather. He was closer in age to her mother’s father than he was to her mother, but he was ageless. He told her often he felt like a ghost, a revenant. He never stopped insisting that she make music seriously and that she carry on his line. (Piercy 61)

In essence, Dinah’s definition of herself as a Jew derives directly from her father’s teachings, a powerful memory of what he had instilled in her as a child. At one point, she expresses her hope of having a child to Susan, who wants no part in such an endeavor. After already raising kids with Willie, Susan believes she has “paid her dues to womanhood” (Piercy 31) and now prefers to concentrate on her dream to become a fashion designer. So she instantly rejects Dinah’s
deepest wish without ever realizing or even inquiring further about why rearing children means so much to her. Therefore, Dinah’s Jewish identity truly has no place in their relationship for the extension of this spirituality is not recognized or understood.

The disagreement over children remains unresolved, where Dinah’s urge to develop a Jewish home with her own offspring begins to forge steady cracks in their relationship. But the ultimate wedge involves the sudden fight concerning Susan’s strange fixation on Tyrone. When she has a near-fatal car accident driving to his house in a dangerous blizzard after one of his requests, Dinah expresses her anger. Immediately, Susan interprets Dinah’s protectiveness as control. She exclaims:

…You’re simply jealous of Tyrone. You think nobody should have more than you have. You resent his style and you want me to pretend he doesn’t exist… You’re secretly a very possessive bitch. You simply don’t want me to be close to anyone else. You’re afraid you can’t compete! (Piercy 94)

This heated quarrel represents a complex turning point for Dinah on several key levels. First of all, it marks what becomes a dramatic split that effectively ends the long-term romance both women had shared. Second, their parting enables Dinah to focus more time and energy on her spiritual awakening as a devoted Jew and as an eventual mother. Third and last of all, it is significant that their dispute centers on the care of a home, even though it belongs to neither one of them. Tyrone’s summer house embodies a sense of connectedness and understanding that each woman wants to obtain, but finds frustratingly elusive. The growing stress in their relationship that leads to this outburst demonstrates the complicated fractures decaying the women’s attachment, severing the security they once enjoyed in their former intense love affair. As soon as this bond breaks, Dinah feels stranded, searching for a way to remake her home in a literal, a figurative, and most importantly of all, a religious manner.
In many ways, the isolation Dinah feels after this painful breakup transitions her to a much more satisfying place, both physically and spiritually. Despite the positive outcome, this process disturbs Dinah as she comes to terms with her profound loss while navigating back to Judaism. The act of constructing new spaces out of old ones and branching beyond the familiar intertwines through Dinah’s difficult journey to renewal. Just as Susan abruptly exits Dinah’s life, Jimmy, Susan’s and Willie’s son, prominently enters her world, offering echoes of her past relationship in addition to new frontiers. He decides to expand Dinah’s home, creating a whole new wing, where he can live to eliminate any dependence on his parents. Dinah does not object, mostly out of her inability to sort through the considerable changes occurring in her once stable universe. Yet she eventually reaches a point that allows her to face the sadness with strength. “She had a sudden fierce determination to survive her loneliness, survive her isolation, to grasp hard her own life in this place she loved” (Piercy 116). This moment empowers Dinah to take charge of her existence and not get swallowed up in her grief over losing Susan’s love.

While Jimmy steadily renovates her house, Dinah embraces Judaism with greater concentration. She starts lighting the Sabbath candles on Friday nights with Jimmy, who eagerly accepts this new tradition, weaving Jewish rituals into their home life. So as Dinah’s household widens, growing to accommodate another inhabitant, it also becomes a sanctuary for religious observance. Increasingly, Dinah delves into her Jewish roots to incorporate possessions she had not touched in years. These gradual steps toward recognizing her heritage through ceremony connect her to a past she’d strayed from after her father’s death. Now this reunion with her faith integrates cultural recognition and a desire to build a spiritually satisfying home. The methodical process of gathering these long-buried symbols of her past also helps Dinah envision celebrating
important Jewish holidays with others, not in solitude. So in addition to an enriching pathway for her cultural return, Judaism serves as a kind of emotional therapy that enables Dinah to break free from her self-imposed isolation and forge a more satisfying Jewish identity:

She had a kiddush cup from her childhood, her best towel to cover the challeh. If she were a family of one, she at least felt more connected making a Sabbath. In her solitude she was finding a sense of herself as a Jew, but she was not sure what that meant in isolation. Judaism is not a religion of hermits, she told herself, but of community. To celebrate Pesach, she needed others. (Piercy 129)

Through a newfound awareness of key occasions on the Jewish calendar, Dinah imagines her own community to help recover from her anguish. In the midst of this complex evolution, Dinah meets an accomplished musician named Itzak Raab who also happens to be Jewish. At first, their relationship centers on a shared love for music as well as an eager desire to compose, record, and perform impactful pieces for the public. But in a relatively short period of time, these professional interactions deepen, inviting the two to explore their sexual attraction. This highly charged transformation coincides with Dinah’s desire to embrace her Jewish history. So Itzak immediately comes to mind as she begins to plan for Passover, the first seder she’s organized since Mark died more than a decade earlier.

Alongside Dinah’s spiritual progress is the constant reformation and reconstruction of domestic spaces that extend to all four of the perspectives that alternate in Piercy’s novel. This continual backdrop of renovation in all its physical and emotional messiness blends with each character’s aspirations to fulfill artistic dreams. Complicating Piercy’s narrative texture further, sexual desire often intrudes, which awkwardly obscures instances of personal growth with graphic scenes that diminish these lovely moments of homecoming. A good example of such unfortunate distractions is the romantic return of Willie in Dinah’s life, even after she begins
dating Itzak. For unexplained reasons, Piercy decides to reformulate the love triangle theme, replacing Susan with Itzak. This move instills a soap opera effect that weakens Dinah’s fascinating development of agency in her search for a nurturing household with Judaism as its cornerstone. Sadly, these sexual encounters eclipse the real substance of Piercy’s novel, which illustrates the process of discovering a spiritual home after years of cultural alienation.

In looking past the romantic entanglements that weigh down this religious journey, though, an ongoing desire to shape personal space becomes a prominent and compelling foundation that extends beyond Dinah alone. Piercy handles this comprehensive transformation with vivid descriptions of the discomfort involved for all of the main characters. As Jimmy builds onto Dinah’s home, for example, Willie constructs a studio onto the house he shares with Susan, causing claustrophobic chaos for both family units. Not actually knowing the reasons behind Dinah’s renovation, Susan assumes the remodeling amounts to a rivalry. She fumes to herself: “It was infuriating that Dinah should decide to build just because they were enlarging. It was pure competitiveness. Nonetheless, when she did run into Dinah, she made a point of asking about the progress of her addition as if she could not simply look out and see” (Piercy 219). The vicinity of their homes, in contrast to the absence of their once sexual intimacy, fans Susan’s anger at seeing such physical changes with Dinah’s living space. In one sense, these dramatic alterations represent the lack of control Susan feels over Dinah’s growth, which she can only suspect, never fully understanding. Their sudden emotional parting from each other forces Susan to observe Dinah’s transformation from her closely situated property, where she can just surmise the motivations. To her, these improvements stem from a personal competition. She cannot imagine that they are the result of Dinah’s desire to forge her own vision of a home without
Susan’s input. Perhaps on a subconscious level, the possibility that Dinah wants to shape a newly styled space, the start of a fresh history that excludes Susan could explain her true frustration.

Although the two women are no longer on pleasant speaking terms, their uneasiness at the disorder of their nearby homes shares many similarities. Dinah also feels frustrated by the tumult. Coming home from a romantic weekend visit with Itzak, who has spontaneously bought a new home in Boston, Dinah finds an awful mess. One of her cats also happens to be missing, which only makes the situation worse, totally upending the tranquility she had once experienced upon returning to her quiet space. While the construction signifies eventual improvements in the various homes that abut each other around this section of Cape Cod, Piercy uses the disarray to reveal concrete markers of unraveling relationships that rebuild in healthier forms. A great deal of focus is concentrated on all of the movements from one home to another, from Dinah’s secret trysts with Willie in another neighbor’s vacant house to Susan’s wistful wanderings through Tyrone’s mansion to Jimmy’s eventual move back to his parents’ place. In the end, the annoyances and frustrations of this manic mix-and-match component resolve themselves with a television drama’s imposed neatness. As the most troublesome piece in this community-wide puzzle, Susan gets erased, unexpectedly drowning with shame in the common pond after she witnesses Tyrone seducing an acquaintance who also lives nearby. After a short period of grief, the underlying force of feeling at home takes over again, absorbing everyone’s concern over Susan in that constant, ever-present drive.

Because of the fluctuating perspectives, the manic movements from one home to another, and Susan’s strange death, which adds an odd melodramatic twist to this story, Dinah’s spiritual awakening feels more diluted by the novel’s end. Like each of the main protagonists, though, she
ultimately reaches her homecoming. Yet her destination, a place with greater complexity than that of her neighbors, contains a religious component, which the others lack. Piercy establishes Dinah’s yearning for a home that reflects her Jewish ancestry while never exploring motivations of faith with Susan, Willie, or Laurie. By the concluding pages, Dinah predictably chooses Itzak and abandons her sexual entanglement with Willie who has progressed to a new lover himself, not long after Susan’s demise. The speed by which these characters change partners resembles their fluid movements from house to house, where people and homes almost seem replaceable. But Dinah does achieve her intended goal of creating a family, fulfilling the directive she felt from her father to continue their bloodline. Now pregnant, she anticipates discussing marriage with Itzak and imagines the child that develops within her:

Finally she was growing the baby that carried on for her father and all the other dead whose memory spread over the sky like the smear of stars up in the cold black night. A seed of light grew in her. If she had never been a dutiful daughter, as her mother had often said (Shirley, whom she must call tomorrow), she at least was a daughter who was doing her duty to the dead. (Piercy 380)

Dinah now understands that her life purpose necessitates structuring a suitable place to nurture Jewish offspring to carry on a lineage. The powerful sense of responsibility to her heritage is a force that compels her to make certain choices, leading Dinah to seek an ideal domestic space to rear her descendants.

The concept of a Jewish home develops with further complexity and emotional warmth in Piercy’s next novel that embraces a very similar notion of domestic security. Published five years later, *The Longings of Women* incorporates Piercy’s theme of domestic security. Each protagonist seeks spiritual and emotional comfort as well as physical protection from a hardened society. Like *Summer People*, this work alternates between three different perspectives to
examine that inner need to achieve a secure personal space. However, *The Longings of Women* differs in the fact that the novel never explores a man’s point of view. This detail is significant because it equates domesticity or the nonexistence of a domiciliary space with womanhood alone, deliberately showing the ways in which a woman’s identity is associated with her home. Furthermore, Piercy interweaves the concept of home into each woman’s outlook with an intricacy and a compassion that *Summer People* lacks. The supreme focus on what ownership of a private space signifies to these women, each from vastly divergent backgrounds, unifies the overall story. For Leila Landsman, an outgrowth of Dinah, in addition to the secondary heroines Mary Burke and Becky Burgess, home reflects divergent meanings. Piercy shows not only how perceptions of a stable, secure household shift in their definitions within each woman’s mind but she also illustrates the way all three lives overlap, profoundly impacting one another. Thus, a complicated texture appears as the fixture of that prototypical home, largely elusive to the women, propelling them along distinctive paths, even as they seek comparable domestic destinations.

Similar to Dinah’s cornerstone position in *Summer People*, Leila Landsman is also a practicing Jew who occupies the most prominent of the three vantage points as she yearns to maintain control over her fracturing family home. Unlike Dinah, however, Leila’s Judaism exists as a fully integrated given, not a process of discovery. This means her Jewish identity blends into her nature without the type of references Piercy applies to Dinah’s development. Instead of delineating religious borders, Piercy focuses on the definition of home and its complex role in Leila’s life. From the novel’s start, Leila’s house embodies an almost sacred nature, which stands as a sanctuary in contrast to the outside world. In addition to its function as a refuge from the
stress of her busy academic career at a Boston university, her home represents a barrier from
certain heartbreak. Quietly suspecting that her husband Nicholas, a flamboyant narcissist, cheats
on her while he produces various plays in New York City, she comforts herself with the
reassurance that his questionable activities do not affect their home life. “They had their
arrangement, one she had gratefully believed they had outgrown. Only away from home. He
wouldn’t lie to her” (Piercy 6). Without checking to confirm whether her hopes are correct, Leila
prefers to pretend that the sanctity of their marriage always prevails within the walls of their
shared home at the very least. This assumption implies an acceptance of his infidelity as long as
it remains out of sight and well beyond the physical space that represents their long history
together. In her entrenched avoidance, Leila concentrates on keeping the household intact,
virtually funding every bill on her own without expecting Nicholas to contribute. The ruse of a
well-managed home distracts her from the agonizing truth of her husband’s open heartlessness.

After constructing these key details about Leila and what amounts to her denial, Piercy
proceeds to Mary Burke’s perspective, which exemplifies a complete absence of any domestic
certainty. In fact, while Leila fights to keep her family life intact with the actual house as a
stabilizing force, Mary has no such protection and endures a much more life-threatening battle.
As she works for an agency cleaning other people’s homes, including Leila’s, Mary must
secretly calculate where to sleep from one day to the next. Not a single one of her clients realizes
she has no place of her own or even a piece of furniture to her name and she wants to ensure that
they never figure out the truth. If these women ever discover that she is homeless, their horror
will situate her even further on the fringes of society. Because they view her as somewhat near
their social strata due to the white suburban aura she painstakingly projects, Mary poses no threat
and offers a natural, quite dignified fit into their upper middle-class consciousness. This trickery also works to Mary’s advantage as she quietly survives her endless hardship. Because she never reveals her true situation, Mary always has several options for where to spend the night when any number of her clients are not home. With this secret strategy in place, she is not limited to Logan Airport or church basements. For greater flexibility, Mary also pet sits, enabling her to justify overnight stays without ever having to hide. To survive from one day to the next, constantly aware that she may have to sleep on the street, Mary must be resourceful at all times.

Although she deliberately presents herself as a harmless older woman who lives with her married daughter, her reality does not resemble this benign image in the least. She has no security whatsoever and exists without any kind of support network. Therefore, she must disguise these dire circumstances. Mary accomplishes this goal by always making sure to have “her big flowered carry-all and her great old purse, so that she would never give the impression of a bag lady, just a cleaning lady going to work” (Piercy 11). Not only is Mary forced to tolerate dangerous uncertainty each day but she also takes great pains to pretend her life contains the same bland conventionalities as the women in the households that employ her. The game plan she develops causes an additional burden because it requires her to disguise herself on a constant basis. Her conscious act of pretending, never straying from the ruse she has created for survival, extends right down to the type of bag that she brings with her to each of the homes she regularly cleans.

Quite ironically, Mary had once been very much like the women whose houses she now scrubs, enjoying similar experiences of impressive privilege and taking advantage of the same financial security. As the wife of a successful businessman, she had the ability to stay in the
family’s comfortable home and raise two children without any monetary concern. Because of her intimate familiarity with the lives of the women she currently services, Mary cannot help comparing herself and remembering back to that steadfast time in her own life with stunned wonder:

Never when she was growing up, when she was having babies, when she was raising her children, did she expect to be alone, ever. She had married right out of college. Two years later, she had borne Cindy. Yet here she was, utterly alone in the world. (Piercy 17)

The portrait of Mary that Piercy offers accomplishes a number of key points that directly connect to the concept of home. In Mary’s reflection on her startling descent, Piercy demonstrates the ephemeral nature of economic stability. Since Mary once had the pleasure of financial insulation only to become destitute years later, she potentially represents the future of her wealthy clients. Therefore, the safety net that appears to shield those deemed fiscally savvy from the dangers of street life contains an unexpected flimsiness. Such fragility means that even the most affluent are not immune to possible vagrancy at some unforeseen moment.

In addition to the frail structure in place that allows capable, well-established people to fall through societal cracks, Piercy illustrates the immediate invisibility assigned to individuals without a home. Even after years of dutifully fulfilling her roles as a wife and a mother, Mary finds herself abandoned and totally unseen. As Piercy explores her perspective throughout the novel, Mary’s imperceptible presence floats through each scene, showing an ingrained sense that people denied homes of their own are viewed as less than human. The chilling message is that the hard work involved in developing roots does not guarantee cultural concern when circumstances arise that drastically reverse long-standing privilege. Mary experiences this phenomenon directly, feeling the coldness of strangers who have no understanding of her
background, unable to guess that she once lived an entitled existence. Yet they seem to know her current status by instinct. As Mary sits alone in a laundromat, she observes how strangers perceive her:

A couple were doing their laundry before work and fighting openly about his mother’s demands. Mary sat there as if she were a pile of laundry. They barely registered her presence. She thought that if she were an intelligence agency, she would hire women like herself, because she could go almost anywhere and no one looked at her. (Piercy 14)

The painful sense that she does not matter because of her lack of financial resources comes through in Mary’s quiet observations. While she is clearly capable of being seen in this public space, Mary nonetheless remains undetectable. Again and again, Piercy returns to Mary’s invisibility as this key character comes to terms with her dehumanized status.

Since her former home all but evaporated in an abrupt divorce when her husband lost sexual interest in her, Mary instantly transforms from a socially advantaged housewife to the unseen other. Memories of her former life, which involve attempts to understand that unsettling path to homelessness, haunt Mary throughout the novel. She replays her tragic metamorphosis from a desirable woman to mere nothingness in search of answers that elude her. Often, what begins as a calculated analysis of where she can safely sleep for the night switches to painful recollections of her past. As she plans ahead for the Thanksgiving holiday, for instance, Mary considers that one of her client families will be traveling to Sanibel Island in Florida, ensuring their home will be open as a convenient place for her to stay. This thought leads to a bittersweet remembrance of an amorous trip she and her then husband Jim took to this same destination many years earlier. But Mary realizes that she had taken Jim’s attraction for granted. “When a man was crazy about you, it was hard to imagine that a time would come when he just wanted
you out of his way, when he treated you like a piece of cheese that had turned bad. Her sin was to get middle-aged. Time nibbled away at her looks” (Piercy 78). To Mary, the catastrophic turn in her life is a direct result of her sexual appeal’s eventual disintegration. Because of her fading beauty, Mary’s economic assets are eventually stripped away. So the benefits she had relied upon, assuming they would never disappear, reflect a rocky foundation. Without any monetary support, a home cannot be sustained and this actuality plunges Mary into instant poverty. Similar to Connie Ramos in Woman on the Edge of Time, Mary is shoved to the margins of society once her financial means vanish. In this sense, Piercy illustrates the blurring of cultural differences, where an evident lack of access to a physical refuge can inspire societal rejection that transcends ethnic diversity. Therefore, otherness may occur due to complicated domestic circumstances that eclipse race as well as religion.

To explore this complex notion further, examining how the presence of a household can provide or remove privilege regardless of cultural background, Piercy introduces Becky Burgess. This third heroine in The Longings of Women has immediate advantages over Mary Burke. In addition to experiencing the advantages of youthful, alluring beauty in her blond, glamorous charisma, Becky never has to worry about where she will sleep from one night to the next. She enjoys the benefit of living rent-free with her parents and siblings while saving money for herself. Despite the convenience, however, this family property deeply embarrasses her and provides no real semblance of comfort. With the house’s rundown appearance and the extensive extended family squeezed into the home, Becky cannot see beyond her bitter humiliation over these circumstances and longs for a better life. The most intriguing aspect of Becky’s introduction in the novel is that Piercy first describes her overcrowded living situation. This
context defines her not simply in materialistic terms, but as an ambitious woman with a focused drive to shape her own financially secure space.

From the start, Becky is an outgrowth of a homelife that reflects constant financial hardship and an ongoing lack of opportunity. Though her parents own their house and have continued to support a large, extended family over many years, their working-class mentality and background in the unglamorous fishing industry inspire Becky’s shame. She also dislikes her Portuguese ancestry because of a heightened sense of prejudice that she perceives when interacting with the larger world. On top of her unspoken frustration, the shortage of privacy that results from a significant number of people who occupy such a limited space also influences her deepening irritation. It bothers her that she must live in such cramped quarters, sharing the same bedroom with two sisters while lamenting that she has few possessions to her name. “What did Becky own besides a cigar box of treasures? Some treasures” (Piercy 24). Her annoyance at the insufficient boundaries that intrude on Becky’s privacy has merit. However, in the context of Mary’s much more appalling predicament, where all of her meager belongings must fit into a single carry-all bag, Becky’s situation comes across as trivial in comparison. In Becky’s view, though, her living conditions are intolerable.

Since she cannot define her personal space, barred from staking out even the smallest corner for herself, Becky resents the obstacles that prevent her from developing her identity. She escapes to the mall and daydreams, evading the responsibilities her mother would automatically assign her at home. This passive-aggressive choice to flee gives Becky the chance to abandon her family in favor of private fantasies of a more free-spirited future. Although she experiences twinges of guilt at this indulgence, Becky justifies her self-involved actions because of how lost
she feels. In her view, she is the real victim. None of her relatives is equipped to guide her to
womanhood. “There were no role models for being a successful modern woman. Becky had to
study it on the TV, paying close attention to details of manner, dress, voice. Those were women
who had created themselves, as she would” (Piercy 28). On the surface, Piercy provides a
focused portrait of Becky’s desire to rise from her working-class circumstances and achieve,
even without any kind of support network. Upon a closer examination of her actions, however,
Becky comes across as quite unsympathetic, bordering on narcissistic, particularly since her
insulated perspective follows Mary’s daily struggle with homelessness. The behavioral snippets
that Piercy furnishes create a sociopathic picture that paves the way for Becky’s infamous future.
In fact, Becky presents an acute contrast to Mary, even though both crave a safe space in the
world.

The overall landscape that evolves in this novel demonstrates how Becky and Mary are at
opposite ends of an active, dynamic housing spectrum. After fully experiencing upper middle-
class security with an impressive family home and its numerous social benefits, Mary exists by
determining her shelter on a day-to-day basis. When none of her clients’ homes is available, she
must accept a corner chair at Logan Airport as her bed for the night. Meanwhile, Becky longs to
break free from her tight-knit household, unable to appreciate that she always has a comfortable,
warm place to stay. Because of Becky’s eager drive to exit her neighborhood and accomplish a
name for herself, further complicated by her protected though modest life, she immediately
dismisses the security granted to her and denied to Mary. The result of these opposing portraits is
an intricate continuum that illustrates Mary’s descent into a black hole of housing uncertainty
while Becky simultaneously rises to gain a homelife that reflects every material benefit she could
ever imagine. Although neither woman ever meets, they are intimately connected through their constant search for a satisfying home, an objective that does not reach an ideally stable resolution for either of them.

Furthermore, in the midst of these two contrasting microcosms, which are parallel and never intersect, Leila floats between Mary and Becky as the personification of domestic balance. She is their steady link, the midpoint of the two exaggerated extremes, even though her household contains its own painful, undeniably dysfunctional strife. Not only does Leila represent the most financially and even emotionally established heroine of this trio but she is also the one person who has a relationship with the other two women. Mary happens to be her housekeeper, diligently barricading her secret life from Leila for most of the novel. In turn, Becky becomes the subject of Leila’s latest book. One afternoon, Leila’s agent eagerly calls to convince her about writing a book on an erotic, tabloid-style murder trial that profiles Becky’s path to notoriety. Because Leila previously produced research examining women in prison, she has a certain expertise on this topic. But the high-profile and seductive nature of Becky’s case, where she stands accused of manipulating a young lover to kill her husband, makes Leila reluctant to accept the project. In the end, though, she agrees to take an unpredictable journey into Becky’s motivations, gaining insight and, eventually, becoming entangled in this world, which alters her own life. With Leila situated at the center of the three women’s diverse destinies, where complex experiences share an unusual commonality, the mutual yearning for control of a home space comes into focus. Mary’s untold wandering and Becky’s limbo state behind bars explain their quiet yearning to attain a fixed refuge while Leila’s search for shelter provides a more complicated picture. However, Leila’s struggle to accept the reality of her
unfaithful marriage, a significant cornerstone of her life, reveals the fractured nature of this sanctuary. Of the three protagonists, Leila’s voyage to an ultimate homecoming is the least obvious because of her outward success. Piercy illustrates with Leila that a household that may seem stable and fulfilling can contain unseen cracks beneath an otherwise pristine surface.

Once Piercy provides the foundations for each woman’s drive, she then outlines distinct differences in their pathways to private spaces for themselves. Leila’s progress toward this goal often involves key interactions with both Mary and Becky. At the same time, Leila occupies a more peripheral role in Mary’s and Becky’s vantage points, particularly within the early sections of the novel. As a whole, this structural organization assigns Leila as the master lens despite the inherent blindness she also exhibits to some degree. Yet Leila also exemplifies a thoughtful integrity that the others sorely lack. She has the ability to see and feel in a manner that Mary and Becky cannot, though her assessments are not always accurate. After Nicholas makes a surprise visit home, for example, spending an intimate night with Leila, he avoids any honest discussion on the state of their troubled marriage and flees the next morning. When Leila returns from work the next day, she finds a handwritten note from Mary, apparently after discovering that Nicholas left a scrawled message behind the bed. This letter is a confession of his latest affair that shocks and humiliates Leila, particularly since she suspects Mary read the mortifying disclosure. In addition to Leila’s agony at her husband’s betrayal, she feels ashamed of what she imagines as Mary’s criticism. “Mrs. Burke was a dour hardworking woman, whom Leila felt to be silently judgmental. Someone whose life had been totally by the book and who thought other choices shameful” (Piercy 22). It is ironic Leila carries this impression of her housekeeper, revealing an awareness, however mistaken, of someone with far less social standing and economic means.
Leila’s instant shame also shows a desire to maintain a superficial image of her home life, which Mary’s note shatters. Indeed, both women actively attempt to preserve fragile secrets from each other and from the universe in general. Mary’s quiet ability to pierce her employer’s carefully constructed structure upsets the balance Leila has tried hard to sustain for almost the entire length of her troubled marriage. Furthermore, Leila’s inaccurate idea of Mary also demonstrates her own insulation, an inability to detect the anguished truth of her housekeeper’s life. Meanwhile, Mary, largely helpless in her own personal situation, possesses confidential information that supplies her with a certain power over Leila. Although Mary does not have the assets to support herself, she demonstrates a stoic resourcefulness that perpetuates her survival.

Despite Leila’s initial misreading of Mary, failing to discern even a hint of her housekeeper’s actual destitution, she collects more accurate insights on Becky while watching news footage of her. After agreeing to write a nonfiction book about the murder trial, Leila begins her research by scanning television interviews, immediately noticing Becky’s dramatic performances. “Obviously Becky…loved the camera. She flirted with it uncontrollably. She spoke to it earnestly and devotedly. It was the eye of a lover, of God. She was engaged in special pleading with the camera-eye. Look at me, see me, love me” (Piercy 32). Becky’s attitude fascinates Leila, who has her own experience with the camera as an expert witness on battered women, testifying in court cases from time to time. Unlike Becky, Leila responds differently to the camera’s presence, which causes instant self-consciousness and inner doubts. Because she is a larger woman, Leila sees the camera as exaggerating her size, distorting her shape. That reaction reveals a great deal about Leila’s comfort out of the public eye and on the sidelines, perhaps even giving credence to her willingness to accept a secondary position in her husband’s
list of priorities for so long. Yet Leila’s capacity to look beyond and outside of herself, never aspiring to be at the center of every social situation, also demonstrates empathy. To her, Becky’s hunger for the camera’s full attention explains the accused murderer’s impoverished background and ache for a better life. “In the shots of Becky’s natal home, the Souza family, Leila read the poverty from which Becky was clearly striving and straining upward” (Piercy 32). Leila draws accurate conclusions, kindly attributing Becky’s need to be in the spotlight as an effort to overcome a difficult history. So she refrains from making any harsh judgments. At the heart of Leila’s interpretation is her straightforward view of Becky’s rundown home. Images of this physical location on news video provide Leila with enough of a context to develop sympathy for her. Piercy illustrates the intricate connection a house can play in impressions people silently have of each other and their economic opportunities. Becky’s house informs Leila of an unavoidable desire for more at any cost.

While digging deeper into this research, Leila bonds with Becky from an analytical distance, directly contrasting her subject’s path with her own evolution to a somewhat stable, domesticated adulthood. As Leila drives around Becky’s former neighborhood, she understands how her own personal benefits prevented her from the same dismal fate. “She had learned early that there were options upon options if she could only escape, if she could only find the road out, which she realized by the tenth grade led through college. Books had been her drug; books had saved her” (Piercy 57). Even though Leila and Becky have vastly different fortunes, their origins are similar. The main difference between them is a keen awareness that Leila gained through academic development, something she recognizes as she wanders around the community Becky yearned to exit by any means possible. Perhaps at this point in Leila’s investigation, however,
she does not realize that Becky also has a college education. The notion that Becky had lacked
the intellectual capacity that collegiate training can supply could be a mistaken assumption on
Leila’s part. In truth, Becky also attended college and followed through to receive her degree,
exhibiting great intelligence and determination. Yet she still finds herself faced with an uphill
battle for financial success. Even with all of her efforts to stand out and get promoted at the tiny
cable station where she works, Becky cannot make the transition to a higher paying position.
Angry and frustrated, she feels bitter at the limitations imposed on her that she cannot seem to
overcome:

She had a college degree. She had learned how to speak correctly and how to
dress like one of them, attractive girls born to the right suburbs, and she had
learned to use makeup, by watching, by reading magazines, by imitating, and
how to wear her hair in a flattering fashion up-to-date but not extreme. She
had given herself those advantages, and here she was, a receptionist at a cable
TV office, which was better than New Bedj but not even halfway where she
wanted to go. (Piercy 86)

Despite earning a college degree, Becky’s prospects appear to be narrow at this particular
workplace. Just as Leila fails to recognize the subject of her book’s academic background, Becky
herself shows a similar rigidity by staying at a job that refuses to help her grow into a more
satisfying career.

Both women display an inflexibility that prevents certain in-depth critical thinking.
Piercy shows these extensive gaps in understanding, allowing the narrative to provide a complex
reality that the protagonists themselves cannot identify. The result of Leila’s oversight and
Becky’s struggle is that a subtle yet pervasive othering comes into view. Because of Becky’s
conventional good looks, which she painstakingly maintains, and her charismatic presence on
camera, she does not immediately appear to be marginalized. Somehow, though, her cultural
background as a Portuguese woman from a poor, fishing community affects her advancement, even though she acts in every way possible to conceal her ancestry. Through Piercy’s portrait of Becky and the obstacles she encounters to ensure economic security with homeownership, the invisible roadblocks are quite apparent. Unfortunately, Becky discovers that her best route to stability is via marriage, which further underscores the scarcity of options otherwise before her.

In Leila’s research for her book, she also finds the condo where Becky and her husband Terry had lived during the tumultuous last year of their marriage. Her clinical view of Becky’s former abode is important because it shows the objective culmination of the accused killer’s ambition. At least from the outside, the building appears to Leila as not much of an improvement from Becky’s family house:

The condo had been young, but not new when the Burgesses moved in, she guessed, time for the drab landscaping of years and barberries to take root, the little trees to cease looking like green lollipops. Time enough too for the decks to begin to sag, paths to be worn across the skimpy grass, plastic to start cracking and aluminum to warp out of shape, the trim to cry for paint it was not getting. (Piercy 58)

Leila’s stark assessment of the complex demonstrates a conclusion that Becky fell short in advancing far beyond her humble roots. But because Leila’s comprehension of Becky still needs further development, she has no context of the strategic commitment behind this purchase. All she can do is judge the physical structure without any emotional understanding of Becky’s supreme focus in acquiring this precious space. Through the alternating perspectives in the novel, Piercy so often presents a complexity that exists beyond the material surface, where sentiment, though unshared and unspoken, can influence the perception of reality. Therefore, the rundown premises that Leila views transforms into a castle to Becky because of the spacious freedom it offers. She is unaware of its shortcomings, feeling only delight at the countless
possibilities at her disposal.

Through Becky’s vantage point, the building’s shabby appearance goes unnoticed. In her eyes, this condo is the pinnacle of all homes, an invaluable refuge that she can design and furnish virtually as she sees fit. By the time the couple buys this home with the help of Terry’s parents, the marital bond contains very little affection. In the short period between their fortuitous introduction at the small cable station where Becky works to their rushed marriage, an abrupt event designed to assert the illusion of independence from Terry’s parents, they have become virtual strangers to each other. Laid off from his computer technician job, the fateful impetus that first brings them together, Terry lounges around all day while Becky works to support the two of them by herself. With this growing tension, Becky’s one true love, her dedicated goal long before even meeting Terry, is this home. “She wasn’t overjoyed with their life, but at least they had a clean spacious sunny condo of their own” (Piercy 220). The existence of this home becomes Becky’s obsession to the point where Terry transitions into more of an annoyance than a partner. Her devotion is directed to their house. Furthermore, the condo Becky views with such loving care has no likeness to Leila’s negative impression of this residence. Becky fervently believes that home represents her success in breaking free from economic distress to achieve an impressive stability. So she’s attentive to their condo’s every detail:

> Every morning she woke up and looked at the beautiful unmarred ceiling and the curtains with the blue and white pattern of perky sailboats, and she sighed with pleasure. Every evening after a day at work, she tried to do one good thing for this precious sanctuary from noise and dirt and squalor. She kept the windows and mirrors clear. She scrubbed the burners and placed over the heating coils pretty covers with daisies. No matter if Mrs. Burgess peeked in her drawers and in her corners, never did she find dust bunnies. I am a good wife, Becky told herself, and he doesn’t appreciate me. (Piercy 221)

Becky’s perspective on her home and its loveliness vastly differs from Leila’s view. Although
Leila only sees the place where Becky had lived from the outside, she would probably get the same impression of it from within as well. Piercy shows that despite the reality of this home’s outward appearance, it is exquisite to Becky simply because she can claim this shelter for herself.

Over time, as Becky’s relationship with Terry worsens, her attachment to the condo only gains strength and intensity. She realizes the marriage is a colossal mistake. By manipulating Terry to marry her after a vehement fight with his parents about his future, their marital closeness reflects a superficiality that inevitably leads to failure. In addition to the tension between them over this profound inability to understand each other and Terry’s endless unemployment, his parents continue to be an enormous barrier, especially his mother. Her disapproval of Becky from the start forces Terry to choose between the two women in his life. Since his parents provide financial support, Becky automatically loses. She gets cast to the side, rejected and alone despite the fact that she still shares the home with Terry for the time being. Once again, she is pushed into a secondary position. As a result of such marginalization, the condo gains even more importance to Becky because this home symbolizes her only emotional connection to the world. As she feels her marriage swiftly falling apart, Becky becomes more and more desperate, suffering from nightmares about losing this one source of joy:

	Sometimes she had nightmares that he left her, and she would wake up shaking. She would be wandering around the streets looking for her home, and she would not find it. She would be lost, shut out. She would know that someone had promised to love her, but that he had stopped and he had gone away and somehow he had taken their home with him. (Piercy 221)

The condo represents Becky’s independence, an ability to stand on her own while also providing shelter on terms she can define. Becky’s very real fear that she will have to surrender her home
in an imminent divorce leads to her subsequent decision to seduce a teenaged boy into killing Terry. Piercy relates this plot in carefully shaped snippets, mixing past and present, multiple perspectives, and Leila’s discoveries through interviews as well as a detailed narrative of Becky’s transformation into a cunning murderer. In the end, though, Becky’s entire motivation comes down to her determination to keep a home she genuinely treasures.

The despair Becky feels at the threat of losing her home remains Mary’s day-to-day reality. Although the two women seem different in every manner possible, from their ages to their occupations to their dispositions before an often indifferent world, Becky and Mary are both engaged in the same drive. They want refuge at any cost. Unlike Mary, Becky is willing to transcend the moral boundary into murder to maintain this goal. Mary, on the other hand, resorts to surreptitious means for shelter, acquiescing to an invisibility that Becky could never accept. While Becky hungers for the camera, eager to portray herself as the victim of an obsessed boyfriend willing to kill for her love, Mary chooses to blend in and never asks for the public’s understanding. To survive from one night to the next, she follows a certain inconspicuous routine:

Until she could squat for the night, whether in a basement or a garage or someone’s momentarily vacated house, she had hours to kill. She rode public transportation out to the end of the line and back. She walked around. Malls were for the sitting. She always looked respectable enough not to be bothered, so long as she didn’t become familiar. Once again, her invisibility helped. (Piercy 79)

This willingness to tolerate being undetectable and suspending her ego for the sake of an eventual home gives Mary an advantage over Becky, a woman who yearns for visibility. Becky specifically chooses to work in the television industry because of her dream to be on camera and admired by viewers. During her college years, Becky decided to pursue the communication arts
for an opportunity to be the center of attention. “She wanted to be seen or to be around people who were looked at” (Piercy 49). Unfortunately for her, this narcissism lands Becky in prison for life, causing her to lose everything, which includes that treasured home, now reduced to news footage Leila later views.

In contrast, Mary’s fate offers much more hope for a domestically secure future and involves Leila as well. After miraculously surviving a fire in an abandoned building that had seemed to be the perfect refuge, Mary drags herself to Leila’s to recuperate, thinking her employer’s home is available. When Leila comes home to find Mary unconscious in her bed, everything immediately changes in their relationship. Through detailed research and extensive phone calls, Leila finds out the truth about Mary’s life and saves her. In short order, Leila facilitates a new situation for Mary, where she can be a live-in housekeeper and nanny. Because Leila’s sister needs help after multiple abandonments by various men, the arrangement falls nearly into place. Mary’s perspective concludes with her reflection:

Life has changed for me, but it could change back. I’m not invisible. I don’t haunt alleys and garages like a starving cat. People meet me. I have a name and they see me. I have a home. I have friends. Eight years of being trash, and now I’m human again. (Piercy 426)

Even though Mary accepts the inhumanity assigned to her while she’s homeless, it pains her in the same way that getting overlooked hurts Becky. But the two women deal with their discomfort in very divergent fashions. Consequently, their fates lead them to sanctuaries at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Leila’s destiny remains situated in between these two extremes, eventually relocating to a home she can manage without Nicholas. Through her journey to cover the murder case, following leads to interview family members from every side of the story, Leila meets the uncle
of Becky’s young boyfriend and leaves her unhappy marriage behind. After selling the home they shared, she purchases a modest duplex, maintaining her independence while dating this new love interest and marvels at her unexpected direction:

She had new friends who were meaningful to her, but perhaps her growing interest in women without homes was the most important thing [...] It was a matter not only of studying them, as other academics were doing, but of working to provide options openings. She wanted as many choices as she could have, and she wanted those women to have choices too. (Piercy 432)

Leila’s focus, which directly relates to her discovery of Mary’s silent struggle to survive without a home, brings this novel full circle. Though every loose end is conveniently tied up by the work’s conclusion, Piercy examines how women relate to and identify with a domestic space through the depiction of three very different heroines. For them, the ultimate value of a refuge against an alienating world comes across with compassion. Piercy demonstrates that personal homelands are necessary, particularly when cultural estrangement becomes a factor, whether this reality can be detected through distinct physical appearances or not.

As a Jewish woman writer, Marge Piercy deeply understands how it feels to be cast as peripheral to society and she embodies this distress through various interpretations of homecomings to resolve that alienation. Her outsider status, which she endured from an early age as a neglected child and through emotionally abusive marriages, provides empathic insights that enrich her novels. Through the decidedly different viewpoints of her primary protagonists Connie Ramos in Woman on the Edge of Time, Dinah Adler in Summer People, and Leila Landsman in The Longings of Women, Piercy demonstrates the pain of isolation and the resolve to discover some form of belonging as a result. What’s more, she explores her Jewish roots with certain protagonists and plotlines, transforming the potent otherness Judaism represents to
broader characteristics. In the process, Piercy shapes the idea of cultural estrangement into a concrete notion that a wider audience can appreciate. Within each of the worlds she constructs, the consistent journey to seek refuge from alienating environments offers a vision of the Jewish woman as an outcast. While Piercy’s Judaic identity is not always apparent in her writing, her sensibility of a marginal existence informs the choices as well as the inner core of each woman she develops. Consequently, she brings poignant awareness to women profiled as distant outsiders, showing the immense value of personal sanctuaries to those on the cultural outskirts, thereby giving them a place where they will always enjoy acceptance. Through the complexities of her Judaic experience, which intimately involve surviving abusive situations with consequential works of fiction, poetry, and personal essays, Piercy epitomizes an essential voice. Although she achieved some acclaim for her work, Piercy still does not receive the literary attention that she deserves for her representations of Judaic circumstances through the perspective of women. Her crucial, feminist depictions of cultural estrangement in the context of Jewish womanhood warrant further study and in-depth appreciation. Alongside the profound accomplishments of Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, and Cynthia Ozick, Marge Piercy has undoubtedly earned her own position of great achievement as one of the most important Jewish women writers in contemporary American literature.
Often situated on the literary scene’s fringes, regularly overlooked as a valued voice in the rituals of Judaism, the Jewish woman writer is an outsider. She navigates this secondary position alone on both cultural and religious levels with very little support from either realm. Because of these complex circumstances, women writers with Judaic ancestry endure a double burden, where they must define their identity largely in isolation as they struggle to find a place of belonging. This experience, frequently taking unexpected turns and leading to unpredictable destinations, translates into an endless search for a homeland. Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Marge Piercy each embarked upon this complicated navigation and, to a certain degree, prevailed. Their exceptional fiction imaginatively details the experience of this dual estrangement, decoding a complicated patriarchal oppression so often ignored and misunderstood. Although all of these authors emotionally and psychologically suffered from the silent mistreatment exemplified in personal episodes of marginalization, their exemplary ability to depict such apathy illustrates evident triumphs. Through the diverse stories which comprise their collective body of creative work, these Jewish women writers accentuate the desolation intrinsic to Judaic womanhood and illuminate its realities. As a result, the authors boldly confront an indifferent American culture that values assimilation and misogynistic perspectives over ethnic awareness and inclusive viewpoints. To resolve this complex, repressive attitude, each of the five authors conceptualizes unique safe havens of acceptance to shield against inherent alienation. The connected nature of their narratives, where multi-faceted isolation
embodies the central conflict and homelands signify the predominant resolution, demonstrates that Jewish-American women writers explore a unified yet complicated theme. In fact, the aesthetic similarities of these stories underscore the validity of creating a subgenre of American literature that celebrates the literary endeavors of Jewish women.

By recognizing the established links between these authors’ focus on estrangement, a more comprehensive understanding of this fundamental subject matter will emerge. Together, Yezierska, Parker, Paley, Ozick, and Piercy offer a rich texture of complementary perspectives in the context of figurative journeys to discover belonging. With well-crafted stories that range quite extensively in their specific protagonists, time periods, settings, styles, and symbolic attempts to secure acceptance, these works unite to illustrate how mainstream American culture renounces diverse ethnicities. Furthermore, the writers delve into complex dimensions of the resulting alienation that transcend gender, race, and religion to show the universality of repression from dominant forces in society. All five authors’ efforts reveal the systemic cruelty behind subjecting minority groups of any kind to the status of otherness. Through these writers own personal experiences of exclusion, where they themselves endured agonizing dismissals simply for being Jewish, the realities of cultural prejudice surface in their fiction. By synthesizing memory, Judaic family histories, and creative visions of homeland as protection against culturally imposed barriers, the Jewish women writers of this study challenge provincial views of ethnic voices to determine enriching interpretations of refuge from relentless prejudice.

In addition to the purposeful journeys integrated within their imaginative texts, the five authors individually connect as Jewish women who comprehend cultural alienation on quite personal levels. Active as prolific writers within different periods of the twentieth century, each
author represents notable historic moments of her lifetime in the context of desolation. Taken as a whole, the Great Depression, the McCarthy era, both World Wars, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and women’s rights marches, among other pivotal events, are woven into the writers’ texts as relevant, often intimate, backdrops of their examinations of cultural detachment. In certain instances, where the authors’ experiences overlap, myriad interpretations of the same epochs are represented, frequently from opposite ends of the historical spectrum. In the case of Yezierska and Parker, for instance, both authors were creative contemporaries who each possessed firsthand knowledge of the proliferation of New York’s sweatshop factories during the early 1900s and the Great Depression. Yet substantially contrasting social classes informed their divergent perspectives within the framework of alienation. Yezierska’s impoverished circumstances on the Lower East Side, where she endured abusive factory work to survive, and Parker’s family wealth on the Upper West Side, with her father’s often inhumane management of sweatshop laborers, positions the authors’ outlooks in a diametrically opposed manner. Both women writers arrived at identical conclusions about the sweatshop industry’s cruelty and explored the same material from different sets of vital experiences. Therefore, the presence of cultural estrangement contains considerable similarities between the two authors while also illustrating the ingrained complexities, showing meaningful connections that the writers share. In this sense, feelings of otherness exceed social class to highlight how marginalized cultural identities generate unjust divisions that are not affected by economic status. Indeed, the extreme alienation that both Yezierska and Parker privately suffered surpassed their financial positions to prove the universality of their experiences as Jewish women who lived as outsiders within their own worlds.
Similar connections between other Judaic women writers in this study further clarify the intricate dimensions of estrangement. Unlike Yezierska and Parker, who grew up in the same city, Grace Paley and Marge Piercy matured in far different regions of the country, but their advocacy of political awareness closely resembles each other. The two authors share an unmistakable passion for social action that profoundly influences their works. While Paley’s roots are embedded in the Bronx and Piercy first called Detroit her home, both women embody a comparable ferocity in tone and style concerning social issues. Their fervent commitment to crucial topics that range from the women’s movement, including abortion rights, to peaceful international relations, specifically vocalizing criticisms of the Vietnam War, reveal these authors to be quite alike in their mindsets. Despite distinctly different upbringings, where Paley enjoyed affectionate family relations as a young child while Piercy suffered from emotional neglect and physical abuse, both women identify themselves as dedicated activists. In addition to writing fiction and poetry that reflect political subject matter, they each published detailed essays to champion national and global reforms designed to make the world more humane, inclusive, and fair to every ethnicity. Even though Paley and Piercy each come from very different backgrounds, they both comprehend the pain of ostracism firsthand and experienced alienation as a result. To confront these personal struggles, the two authors separately strived to generate social consciousness through their writing and demonstrations. They each endeavored to build positive communities that embrace diversity rather than deny the acceptance of those who belong to marginalized groups. Paley and Piercy poignantly show that cultural desolation can cause angst in Jewish women’s lives regardless of emotional support during childhood. Remarkably,
these writers did not acquiesce to such distressing circumstances, but utilized both their narrative and bodily voices in an effort to drive broad social change.

Cognizance of and empathy toward others’ societal exclusion are important qualities that all five of the authors possess. Their sensibility of this torment derives from personal knowledge of estrangement’s damaging results as well as an ability to observe the cultural complexities that exist in the world around them. While education can often assist in developing such perceptiveness, each of the Jewish-American women writers of this study experienced unresolvable conflicts with American institutions geared to building appreciation of any kind. Yezierska had to fight for admittance to college, persevering in night school over a number of years before she could obtain an opportunity so elusive to her. After finally gaining acceptance, she encountered instant, campus-wide rejection and ridicule because of her unfashionable appearance, further isolating this author as an outsider. In addition, Parker and Paley endured traumatic treatment within their respective public school systems, which discouraged them from attending college. So neither author ever earned a degree, though both taught writing courses later in their lives. Notwithstanding that Piercy and Ozick pursued university educations, even attaining credentials at the masters’ level, they each became disenchanted with higher learning and chose to focus exclusively on their writing instead. The varying issues that each of these authors faced could indicate the limiting effect that education represented to their creative endeavors. Although none of the five writers openly accuse particular educational systems of inhibiting their imaginative pursuits, the difficulties each Jewish woman confronted are telling. Perhaps as Jewish women artists, these authors did not feel such institutions were supportive of their writing aspirations. After all, they each bore the cultural and religious discrimination
ideologically imposed on them in other spheres of American society. At the time when all of the writers examined in this project attended school, predating the women’s rights movement, it is feasible that they contended with sexist, demoralizing treatment. Furthermore, their Judaic identities may have complicated this potentially discouraging reception to heighten the alienation that these authors withstood. While each of these Jewish women writers engaged with their Judaic heritage in divergent manners, they consistently incorporate aspects of their ancestry, if only through the scrutiny of alienation, into their texts.

In every instance, whether the author followed through with her education or abandoned formal schooling altogether, all of the writers within this study relied heavily on independent reading to combat alienation. The self-discipline that these Jewish women consistently applied to their writing also factored into the voracious and admirable commitment to absorbing as many books as possible. Therefore, each of the highlighted authors can be considered self-educated in her chosen field, embodying extensive knowledge of literature, American and otherwise, as a basis for her narrative contributions to come. On a regular basis, particularly during each of these authors’ childhoods, feelings of loneliness and strained emotional divisions from others often inspired the future writers to immerse themselves in reading over social interactions. This act not only provided nourishing connections they could not enjoy in their daily lives, but it also supplied the kind of rich education that classroom learning simply could not offer. Indeed, to different extents, the Jewish women authors examined within this project expressed boredom, frustration, and exclusion in reflections of their public-school experiences. Paley, Parker, and Ozick especially emerge as authors who found their secondary-school educations to be demeaning and divisive. For this very appropriate reason, all three writers turned to reading
works relevant to their own imaginative evolutions in order to contend with the trauma inflicted on them by conventional approaches to schooling. In the process of familiarizing themselves with other authors akin to their craft, the five Jewish-American women writers gained further knowledge of their own heritage as well. Reading opened up the universe to each of these artists, fulfilling multiple capacities to shape their cultural identities with their individual connections to Judaism.

Interpretations of this evolving awareness vary quite widely within the overall body of work analyzed in this study, where the authors address personal notions of their cultural fragmentation. Oftentimes in the highlighted texts, spiritual and religious references to Judaism are substituted with facets of societal estrangement. Yet that generalization does not apply to all of the Jewish-American women writers who are examined. Of the five profiles, Ozick most prominently integrates Judaism into her fiction. As her narratives evolved to epitomize Ozick’s singular voice and style, gradually emerging from behind an obsessive adulation of Henry James, she fused Judaic themes into her stories on a frequent basis. Because of her avid interest in Jewish traditions, Ozick regularly synthesizes biblical, Talmudic, and mystical threads into her work, which can require a Judaic understanding that general readers may not possess. Principally, for this reason, her texts have received harsh criticisms. But connecting with her audience is secondary to the creation of descriptive inspections of Judaism from multiple angles that Ozick instills into her short stories and novels. Out of the five authors featured in this study, Piercy’s texts are the closest to Ozick’s because of the incremental integration of Jewish concepts in her fictional works. Over time, Piercy’s books also reflect more Judaic content, demonstrating similar parallels to Ozick that illustrate an increased comfort with her religious
identity. The one nuanced difference between the two writers’ portrait of Judaism, however, is Piercy concentrates more on the Jewish rituals of Hebrew blessings rather than the obscure textual histories that fascinate Ozick. By contrast, Yezierska and Paley depict cultural aspects of Judaism, largely evading descriptions of Judaic practice to portray the advantages of membership in an inviting community as a weapon against alienation.

Lastly, it should not be overlooked that two of the five authors grew up in multicultural households, where one parent identified as Christian, which magnified the estrangement that each of these writers endured. Parker’s mother and stepmother were Protestant and Roman Catholic, respectively. Because of matrilineal descent, Parker was technically considered to be a Christian as well. However, she repudiated such an affiliation and privately aligned herself with Judaism instead. Her father’s Jewish identity provided Parker with access to Judaic culture through his side of the family during her childhood years. Furthermore, the affection from her father’s relatives sharply contrasted with her stepmother’s cruelty and the punishing nature of each Catholic school that she had been forced to attend. Overall, though, Parker viewed herself as an outsider because of the ambiguous nature of her spiritual belonging, where she never gained a comprehensive understanding of either religion. Yet thanks to Parker’s stronger connection to Judaism, this author stated toward the end of her life that she “was just a little Jewish girl trying to be cute.”

1 Parker’s association with an oppressed ethnicity more closely reflected the otherness and cultural fragmentation that she secretly bore, which this author

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1 As referenced on multiple occasions within this project, the above-mentioned quote is often attributed to Parker. But no definitive information exists concerning when, where, and how she allegedly conveyed the thought. However, in criticism, such as Scott Donaldson’s 2016 article “Scott and Dottie,” as well as biographies, both book-form and online, these words are associated with her as something that Parker said later in life. In general, Parker tended to be very private about her ethnic background and Jewish roots.
translated into central elements of emotional division in her short stories. Like Parker, Piercy also sustained a problematic religious identity as a result of her parents’ interfaith marriage. However, since her mother was a Jew, Piercy earned automatic acceptance into the Jewish religion, according to the Judaic principles of matrilineal descent. So on that particular front, she did not suffer through a struggle comparable to Parker’s conflicts. Despite this concrete, unquestioned recognition of her Jewishness, though, Piercy still had to contend with her Christian father’s general contempt toward religion of any kind and his family’s anti-Semitic attitude. Therefore, Piercy also experienced rejection and great loneliness because of the spiritual obstacles that were entrenched within her family. This feeling of immense estrangement serves as a foundational component in Piercy’s novels. Furthermore, she progressively integrates Jewish identity and a search for home into the numerous explorations of cultural alienation woven into her fiction.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the connections between these five Jewish-American women writers, an intricate texture investigating multiple facets of desolation materializes. In addition to the various elements mentioned earlier that draw the authors together, familial conflicts and a powerful need to express feelings of extreme alienation also define the authors highlighted within this project. Notably, all of the Jewish women writers studied experienced strained relationships with their fathers to varying degrees. Misogynistic attitudes originating from the patriarchal foundations of Judaism, traditional expectations that Jewish women prioritize domestic duties over individual aspirations, and a fundamental refusal from paternal parents to accept the uncompromising desire of their daughters to become writers all contribute to this complicated discord. Perhaps as a partial outcome of that friction with the first
significant male relationship in theirs lives, all but one of the authors experienced emotionally abusive romantic relationships. In addition to the psychological toll that Parker endured, she also weathered physical mistreatment from certain intimate partners. Only Ozick, whose marriage lasted for sixty-five years until her husband’s death, enjoyed a fulfilling marital union. But even with these noteworthy exceptions, the five Jewish-American women writers share profound similarities in common. These striking resemblances create an overall fabric to explain the cultural, spiritual, and religious links of these authors within this specialized framework of Judaic literature. Consequently, a much more in-depth understanding of their Jewish identities, the complex themes that revolve around otherness, and the quest to secure sanctuary is achievable.

With a foundation establishing the transformation of Jewish women writers’ personal experiences into sophisticated literature about ethnic estrangement, further studies can then blossom from this framework. A number of Judaic-oriented, women authors in this tradition could thus be explored to cement the argument for a specialized subgenre of America’s literary canon. Ranging an extensive span of time from Yezierska’s era to the present day, a wide array of authors who represent Jewish womanhood, either through their own identities as they relate to cultural alienation or via the subject matter they explore, may be thoroughly examined in the future. By integrating additional authors who qualify as belonging within this analytical structure, the case for recognizing the unique and valid perspectives that Jewish women writers bring to American literature will be strengthened. Currently, women who publish work that reflects Judaic concerns are not viewed as members of a meaningful category of literary efforts. Instead, these endeavors disappear into the general output of fiction without the distinction of
specifically exploring Jewish women’s lived experience. Even worse, because male Jewish writers have gained greater credence in American literary circles, particularly since World War II, their limited outlook dominates the overall narrative depiction of Judaic life. As a result, the forceful ability of Jewish women authors to command recognition for their portrayal of the world through their individual, Judaic lens necessarily fractures. This means that Jewish writers who are men unquestionably determine how the reading public views Judaism within America, thereby obscuring their counterparts’ scrutiny of cultural alienation and the quest to find safe refuge in imaginative homelands. Therefore, Jewish women authors as artists in their own right and their crucial navigation of disconnectedness are marginalized only to be overlooked.

To correct such a significant omission, enabling this project to attain its intended impact, analysis that incorporates more Jewish women authors in the context of crucial explorations of estrangement must continue. Fannie Hurst (1889-1968), Tillie Olsen (1912-2007), Natalie L.M. Petesch (1924-2021), Joanne Greenberg (1932-), Anita Diamant (1951-), and Nicole Kraus (1974-) are also Jewish-American women authors who could feasibly be featured in an expansion of this current study. Each of these writers deserves considerable to the same meticulous degree that this project supplies and would potentially fortify the argument for a literary subgenre of Jewish-American women authors. As a collection of writers, their substantial scope of experience and their literary interpretations of detrimental ethnic divisions typify the complicated nature of Jewish womanhood. These writers’ published works represent stories of displaced Judaic women, conflicted religious identities, the silent struggles of mental illness, biblical recreations, and complex explorations of the Holocaust, among other topics that are immensely relevant to the established domain. Indeed, the above-mentioned Jewish-American
women authors offer great possibilities of essential Judaic experience to complement the original set of writers featured within this project.

In imagining another cycle of study, a number of the previously listed authors would be ideal candidates adjacent to the original group of Jewish women writers, enhancing the common threads of Judaic loneliness and the search for an authentic home. To broaden the foundation that Yezierska offers, Fannie Hurst provides a exemplary counterpart. Often examined in relationship to Yezierska’s style, subject matter, and time period, Hurst enriches this basis for analyzing the intricate connections that link Jewish-American women authors together. Born October 18, 1889 in Hamilton, Ohio to a German-Jewish family, Hurst secretly coped with uncertainty about her Judaic ancestry. Wendy Graham notes: “For much of her life, Hurst was reticent about her Jewish identity; she sublimated her experience of ethnic prejudice at boarding school into a concern for African-Americans, immigrants, and working class women” (Graham 2021).

In fact, several of Hurst’s texts avoid incorporating Judaic references because of the author’s hesitation to embrace her ethnic roots. However, she did not completely evade this subject matter as Diane Lichtenstein observes. Lichtenstein theorizes that Hurst felt reticent about openly vocalizing her Judaic heritage because she “was simultaneously embarrassed by and proud of being a Jew” (Lichtenstein 27).

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2 Graham’s 2021 essay about Hurst appears in “The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women” within the Jewish Women's Archive website and offers a detailed biography of this author's life. It includes a comprehensive overview of her childhood, complicated relationships with her parents, the popularity of her novels and short stories, and the controversies surrounding her treatment of race.

3 Lichtenstein’s 1988 article “Fannie Hurst and Her Nineteenth-Century Predecessors” closely compares the author and her work to Rebekah Gumpert Hyneman and Emma Wolf. In this way, Lichtenstein makes a powerful argument for the sophistication of Hurst’s narratives. She shows that unlike the prior Jewish women writers, Hurst looks at the complexities of Judaic womanhood and does not neatly conclude her works with uplifting, superficial solutions.
and cultural ambivalence, Lichtenstein points out another facet that demonstrates this author’s compatibility with the prior Jewish women writers studied in this project. She claims:

During her forty-year writing career, Hurst usually wrote about women who struggle to find safety in a world which can be treacherous for women. She wrote about Jewish women much less often, as if to find her own safety from a world which could be hostile toward a Jewish woman who wanted to be a successful writer; she also sought safety from her triple identity of American, Jew, and woman, a potentially painful and complicated identity. (Lichtenstein 35-36)

All of the elements that Lichtenstein describes concerning Hurst, her identity, her creative direction, and her subject matter exemplify the intricate conflicts and private struggles that the authors profiled in this project routinely endured. For these reasons, Fannie Hurst is an appropriate choice to expand upon the study of Jewish-American women writers and reinforce the value of recognizing these authors as an enriching category of literature.

Another author who could amplify the argument for a specialized literary classification of Jewish womanhood in this expanded study of Judaic alienation is Tillie Olsen. Born on January 14, 1912 in Wahoo, Nebraska, Olsen was raised in a Russian immigrant family. However, like Parker and Piercy, Olsen’s parents were of different religious faiths. Because her mother did not possess Judaic ancestry, Olsen falls into the same complicated bracket as Parker. But Bonnie Lyons asserts that this technicality does not diminish Olsen’s chosen cultural identity. In fact, Lyons describes Olsen as reconfiguring her heritage and states that this author “considers herself a Jewish atheist, and ‘Tell Me a Riddle,’ her greatest fiction, is also one of the finest works of American Jewish literature” (Lyons 91).4 Because of the exceptional distinction Lyons grants to this work, it would be worthwhile to examine the story in thorough detail, particularly through

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4 Lyons’s 1986 article titled “Tillie Olsen: The Writer as a Jewish Woman” supplies a comprehensive analysis of the author from multiple angles. This scholar examines Olsen’s familial background and subject matter through the prism of the author’s complex identity.
the lens of societal alienation. Furthermore, in addition to Olsen’s substantial connection to Parker and Piercy, she is often compared to Paley because of her focus on working-class womanhood, Judaic subject matter, and socialist issues. These factors demonstrate Olsen’s impressive suitability as part of a potential second generation of comprehensive study concerning Jewish-American women authors.

Moreover, Joanne Greenberg might be a third significant Jewish writer for this continued study because she combines Judaic tropes and alienation quite prominently into her body of work. Born September 24, 1932 in Brooklyn, New York, Greenberg suffered from schizophrenia during her childhood years. Using the pseudonym “Hannah Green,” Greenberg wrote about this difficult experience in her most famous work titled *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964). This semi-autobiographical novel focuses on the treatment that she received as a teenager at the Chestnut Lodge Hospital in Rockville, Maryland. In addition, Greenberg incorporates the realities of mental illness and its isolating effects alongside Judaic themes as structural elements of her novel. Sanford E. Marovitz emphasizes that Greenberg’s incorporation of Judaism may seem subordinate to her focus on other issues related to specific plotlines in her overall collection of novels and short stories. But he argues that Judaic concepts are integral to her fiction, not peripheral ingredients within a given story. Marovitz explains that Greenberg’s references to Judaism might appear casual because of her seemingly incidental remarks about Jewish people or names. But he stresses that Greenberg’s narrative mentions in this regard are always deliberate. According to Marovitz, they introduce “a Jewish subtext, inconspicuous but made germane by such themes as alienation, persecution, religious tradition, and divine justice present on one level of the fiction, and aspects of Judaism – the faith, the history, the culture, the people
– present on a deeper one” (Marovitz 81). Because of Greenberg’s specialized concentration, where she fuses key principles of Judaism and the myriad dimensions of divisiveness associated with American society’s treatment of this ethnicity, her fiction would certainly bolster the core rationale of this project. Therefore, Greenberg is an important author to feature in further studies of cultural alienation as imagined by Jewish women writers.

To complement the three prior voices profiled, Anita Diamant and Nicole Kraus are also powerful authors to consider in their explorations of themes that underscore Judaic estrangement, principally related to the Bible’s Old Testament and to the Holocaust. Born on June 27, 1951 in Brooklyn, New York, Diamant is best-known for her reimagining of Dinah from Genesis in the novel titled *The Red Tent* (1997). This text centralizes a minor biblical figure, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, to recreate the cultural challenges that ancient Judaic womanhood faced. Sheila E. Jelen comments on Diamant’s inventiveness in how this author “wanted to illuminate a life for which she had very little supporting material” (Jelen 167). In this observation, Jelen introduces an intriguing point that, with further in-depth analysis, could relate precisely to this study.

Diamant, as a Jewish woman writer, marginalized by her ethnic identity and gender, succeeds in elevating a Judaic female from obscurity to personify this novel’s central perspective and highlight oppression during biblical times. Indeed, she grants Dina with a certain social capacity that Diamant herself lacks because of her secondary cultural and spiritual status. Currently,

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5 Marovitz’s 2002 article titled “The Interplay of Faith, Fun, and Justice in Joanne Greenberg’s Fiction” looks at how this author combines numerous elements to portray the complexities of Jewish-American life. This scholar particularly examines how Greenberg uses humor and darkness together in her complicated works.

6 Jelen’s 2008 article “Women and Jewish Literature” offers a summary of a course the author created and taught at the University of Maryland. She looks at a number of different works by Jewish women writers and discusses her approach as well as her students’ reactions to the featured works. Diamant’s historical novel *The Red Tent* is one of the texts that she explains. In addition, Jelen mentions Ozick’s Judaic fiction and her classroom discussions of these pieces as well.
Diamant as well as her novel have not been investigated from this explicit angle and such analysis might lead to apt insights that underscore the project’s underlying argument. Like Diamant, Nicole Kraus also provides notable potential for future study within this same context because of her selected subject matter. Born August 18, 1974 in Manhattan, New York, Kraus’s work has received acclaim for its complicated reflections of the Holocaust. Without looking at the concrete event itself, Kraus probes its traumatic after-effects on her emotionally isolated characters. Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger remark upon Kraus’s specialized focus:

Kraus’s literary method seeks to reconstruct and reassemble fragmented lives, giving her characters a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. To describe the fragmented, chaotic, and anomic world of a century of genocide, dispossession, uprooting, and exile is not an easy task for a writer. Neither is it easy to give shape to lives of characters whose personal histories are marked by an understanding that to be born Jewish is to live in a state of uncertainty and doubt. But rendering these sensibilities and states of being is Kraus’s primary artistic goal and is a shared third-generation characteristic. (Aarons and Berger 153)

The utter desolation and sense of cultural displacement that Kraus synthesizes in her work, especially *The History of Love* (2005) and *Great House* (2010), provide deeply pertinent material that could enrich this study of Jewish-American women authors. In fact, Kraus might prove to be a crucial writer within such an expansion because she illustrates the most contemporary Jewish woman novelist. Therefore, Kraus demonstrates the resiliency of this tradition of exploring Judaic alienation within America’s borders, which further bolsters the need to develop a specialized subgenre recognized by the literary canon.

As a final possibility for future study within the framework of Judaic estrangement,

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7 In their 2017 book *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation*, Aarons and Berger devote their chapter titled “Nicole Kraus Inheriting the Burden of Holocaust Trauma” to examining the author’s depictions of this horrific event in Judaic history.
Natalie L.M. Petesch embodies great possibilities. Born in 1924 to Russian-Polish immigrant parents, little scholarly work has been written about Petesch’s expansive array of short stories, novels, and creative fiction. However, her subject matter on the immigrant experience in America, memory, and marginalized cultures make Petesch an author worth investigating in an elaboration of this original project. As the first woman writer to win the Iowa Short Fiction Award (1974), an accomplished author, an academic who taught at several universities around the country, and a devoted social activist, Petesch exemplifies numerous similarities to the Jewish women previously examined and featured. Indeed, a thorough investigation of her life and work could offer additional strengthening of the call to develop a special category of literature dedicated exclusively to literary efforts by women writers of Judaic heritage.

Over a span of more than one hundred years, Jewish women writers have systematically developed a unified outlook on the struggles of Judaic womanhood amidst America’s bigoted treatment of diverse ethnicities. Based on personal strife, the painful knowledge of Jewish women’s ostracization within both American culture and Judaism itself, and the voracious need to express the complexities of such unwarranted repression in written form, Jewish women authors across a broad period of decades repeatedly concentrate on the theme of alienation from myriad dimensions. Just as consistently, these writers resolve the immense discomfort of relentless estrangement with a focused search for an embracing homeland, a place of continual sanctuary. Indeed, Anzia Yezierska, Dorothy Parker, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, and Marge Paley thoughtfully fuse these crucial elements of unacceptable ethnic divisions and the quest for reassuring refuge within their innovative fiction, poetry, and essays. Intersecting from various personal backgrounds, family histories, social classes, and educational levels, these five distinct
writers converge in their subject matter to prove that profound similarities exist within narratives generated by Jewish-American women authors. Yet to this day, America’s literary canon does not officially recognize the substantial links that create a meaningful texture exploring Jewish womanhood and the desolate obstacles inherent to this identity. Therefore, this project urges significant changes to occur in the way American literary circles view the written expressions of Jewish women. By continually strengthening this project with further examinations that expand on its established foundation and demonstrate the intrinsic connections between Jewish women authors’ lived experience and their subsequent fiction, perhaps momentum can build in the right direction. The additional investigations of Fannie Hurst, Tillie Olsen, Joanne Greenberg, Anita Diamant, Nicole Kraus, and Natalie L.M. Petesch can forcefully intensify the argument contained within the original foundation to show the cohesiveness of Jewish-American women authors. As a result, the collective voices of these wonderful authors will be recognized, not fragmented and potentially absorbed in a general classification of literature that neglects to appreciate the specific artistry and the potent message of inclusion inherent to Jewish women who weave together such meaningful stories. Then the wide assortment of past, present, and future Jewish-American women writers will gain an all-powerful shared presence within American literature and ultimately receive the acknowledgment that they deserve.
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