

DOROTHY PARKER

COMPLETE STORIES

EDITED BY
COLLEEN BREESE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
REGINA BARRECA



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Table of Contents

[PENGUIN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSICS](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[STORIES](#)

[Such a Pretty Little Picture](#)

[Too Bad](#)

[Mr. Durant](#)

[A Certain Lady](#)

[The Wonderful Old Gentleman](#)

[Dialogue at Three in the Morning](#)

[The Last Tea](#)

[Oh! He's Charming!](#)

[Travelogue](#)

[Little Curtis](#)

[The Sexes](#)

[Arrangement in Black and White](#)

[A Telephone Call](#)

[A Terrible Day Tomorrow](#)

[Just a Little One](#)

[The Mantle of Whistler](#)

[The Garter](#)

[New York to Detroit](#)

[Big Blonde](#)

[You Were Perfectly Fine](#)

[The Cradle of Civilization](#)

[But the One on the Right](#)

[Here We Are](#)

[Lady with a Lamp](#)

[Dusk Before Fireworks](#)

[A Young Woman in Green Lace](#)

[Horsie](#)

[Advice to the Little Peyton Girl](#)

[From the Diary of a New York Lady - DURING DAYS OF HORROR, DESPAIR, AND WORLD CHANGE](#)

[Sentiment](#)

[Mrs. Carrington and Mrs. Crane](#)

[The Little Hours](#)

[The Waltz](#)

[The Road Home](#)

[Glory in the Daytime](#)

[Cousin Larry](#)

[Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street](#)

[Clothe the Naked](#)

[Soldiers of the Republic](#)

[The Custard Heart](#)

[Song of the Shirt, 1941](#)

[The Standard of Living](#)

[The Lovely Leave](#)

[The Game](#)

[I Live on Your Visits](#)

[Lolita](#)

[The Banquet of Crow](#)

[The Bolt Behind the Blue](#)

[SKETCHES](#)

[Our Tuesday Club](#)

[As the Spirit Moves](#)

[A Dinner Party Anthology](#)

[A Summer Hotel Anthology](#)

[An Apartment House Anthology](#)

[Men I'm Not Married To](#)

[Welcome Home](#)

[Our Own Crowd](#)

[Professional Youth](#)

COMPLETE STORIES

Dorothy Parker was born to J. Henry and Elizabeth Rothschild on August 22, 1893. Parker's childhood was not a happy one. Her mother died young, and Dorothy did not enjoy a good relationship with her father and stepmother. She began her education at a Catholic convent school in Manhattan before being sent away to Miss Dana's School in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1916, Frank Crowninshield gave Parker an editorial position at *Vogue*, following its publication of a number of her poems. The following year she moved on to write for *Vanity Fair*, where she would later become the theater critic. That same year she met and married Edwin Pond Parker II, whom she divorced a few years later. It was at *Vanity Fair* that Parker met her associates with whom she would form the Algonquin Round Table, the famed New York literary circle. In 1925, Parker also began writing short stories for a new magazine called *The New Yorker*. Her relationship with that publication would last, off and on, until 1957. Parker went abroad in the 1930s, continuing to write poetry and stories. In Europe she met Alan Campbell, whom she married in 1933. The couple divorced in 1947 but remarried in 1950, remaining together until Campbell's death in 1963. Throughout this period in her life, Parker continued to publish collections of her work, including *Enough Rope* (1926), *Sunset Gun* (1928), *Laments for the Living* (1930), and *Death and Taxes* (1931). Her last great work was a play, *The Ladies of the Corridor*, which she wrote with Arnaud d'Usseau, published in 1954. Parker died on June 7, 1967.

Colleen Breese teaches in the English Department at the University of Toledo and is the author of *Excuse My Dust: The Art of Dorothy Parker's Serious Fiction*. She resides with her family in Delaware, Ohio.

Regina Barreca, a professor of English and feminist theory at the University of Connecticut, is the author of *Sweet Revenge: The Wicked Delights of Getting Even*, *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in Literature*, *Perfect Husbands (and other Fairy Tales)*, and *They Used to Call Me Snow White, but I Drifted*. She lives with her husband in Storrs, Connecticut.

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INTRODUCTION

Why is it that many critics seem so intent on defusing the power of Dorothy Parker's writing that she appears more like a terrorist bomb than what she really is: one, solitary, unarmed American writer of great significance? Is it because so many of her critics—one might hesitate to underscore the obvious—so many of her *male* critics—seem to resent, half-consciously, her unwillingness to appease the literary appetites? Is it because Parker did not list among her many talents *The Ability to Play Well with Others*?

Dorothy Parker wrote strong prose for most of her life, and she wrote a lot of it, remaining relentlessly compassionate regarding, and interested in, the sufferings primarily of those who could not extricate themselves from the emotional tortures of unsuccessful personal relationships. Her stories were personal, yes, but also political and have as their shaping principles the larger issues of her day—which remain for the most part the larger issues of our own day (with Prohibition mercifully excepted).

Parker depicted the effects of poverty, economic and spiritual, upon women who remained chronically vulnerable because they received little or no education about the real world—the “real world” being the one outside the fable of love and marriage. But Parker also addressed the ravages of racial discrimination, the effects of war on marriage, the tensions of urban life, and the hollow space between fame and love. Of her domestic portraits one is tempted to say that, for Parker, the word “dysfunctional family” were redundant. 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.

Parker approached these subjects with the courage and intelligence of a woman whose wit refused to permit the absurdities of life to continue along without comment. Irreverent toward anything held sacred—from romance or motherhood to literary teas and ethnic stereotypes—Parker's stories are once playful, painful, and poignant. Her own characteristic refusal to sit down, shut up, and smile at whoever was footing the bill continues to impress readers who come to her for the first time and delight those who are already familiar with the routine. Her humor intimidates some readers, but those it scares off are the ones she wouldn't have wanted anyway.

She didn't court or need the ineffectual. She would not, for example, have wept too long for having frightened good old Freddie from the sketch titled “Men I'm Not Married To.” Freddie, she tells us, “is practically a whole vaudeville show in himself. He is never without a new story of what Pat said to Mike as they were walking down the street, or how Abie tried to cheat Ikie, or what old Aunt Jemima answered when she was asked why she had married for the fifth time. Freddie does them in dialect and I have often thought it is a wonder that we don't all split our sides.” There, in brief, lies the difference between Parker's gift and much of what passed for humor in her own (and in our own) time: Parker's wit caricatures the self-deluded, the powerful, the autocratic, the vain, the silly, and the self-important; it does not rely on mean and small formulas, and it never ridicules the marginalized, the sidelined, or the outcast. When Parker goes for the jugular, it's usually a vein with blue blood in it.

Certainly the portraits of deliriously pretentious intelligentsia Parker poured onto her page tweaked at certain readers, and it's probable that Parker herself was aware of the wince-inducing effect of some of her sharper prose as she left it out of the earlier collections of her work. What

certain is that a number of the stories printed here for the first time since their initial publication in various periodicals contain moments of satire so spectacular that those certain readers mentioned earlier might shrivel up in the manner of a vampire shown a silver cross.

Her silver crosses are fashioned along the lines of this miniature, presented in Parker's previous uncollected early sketch "An Apartment House Anthology":

The minute you step into her apartment you realize that Mrs. Prowse is a woman of fine sensibilities. They stick out, as you might say, all over the place. You can see traces of them in the handmade candles dripping artistically over the polychrome candlesticks; in the single perfect blossom standing upright in a roomy bowl; in the polychrome bust of Dante on the mantel—taken, by many visitors, to be a likeness of William Gibbs McAdoo; most of all in the books left all about, so that Mrs. Prowse, no matter where she is sitting, always can have one hand, to lose herself in. They are, mainly, collections of verse, both free and under control, for Mrs. Prowse is a regular glutton for poetry.

In passage after passage, Parker not only grasps the petit points made by self-proclaimed cognoscenti in order to mock them, but she grasps them hard 'round the throat, and hard enough to put them out of their misery.

Parker went about the business of writing in a very practical way: she did it and got paid for it. But it seems as if there is a fraternity of disgruntled critics who would like to make her pay for her achievement with her reputation. They speak of her "exile" to Hollywood, where she had the audacity to be successful as a screenwriter and the nerve to be nominated for an Academy Award for writing the cinematic masterpiece *A Star Is Born*. They argue that she "sold out" and "wasted" herself by writing about narrow topics.

Let's clear up this business about narrow topics: Parker concerns herself primarily with the emotional and intellectual landscape of women, the places where a thin overlay of social soil covers the minefields of very personal disaffection, rejection, betrayal, and loss. She manages throughout all to make her work funny (and that she is funny is one of the most important things about her) while tilling away at this dangerous garden; and for that generations of women and men have thanked her by reading her, memorizing her, making movies about her, performing plays based on her, and writing books analyzing her—but also castigating her most ruthlessly, passing on untruths behind her back and since 1967 speaking most ill of the dead.

Narrow topics? It is true that Parker often viewed her large subjects through small lenses, and that sometimes—sometimes—her fanatic attention to detail can be mistaken for a passion for minutiae instead of a passion for sharply focused observation. But those disparaging Parker's accomplishments usually make only passing (if not parenthetical) reference to the fact that she has remained a popular writer for more than sixty years, a woman who constructed a literary reputation for herself by writing satirical and witty prose and poetry when women were not supposed to have a sense of humor, and writing about the battle between the classes with as much appetite and bite as she brought to the struggle between the sexes.

You might say that Dorothy Parker should be placed at the head of her generation's class, given her ability to willfully and wickedly push, prod, and pinch her readers into thought, emotion, laughter, and the wish to change the world as we've always known it. You might say that she has surely earned recognition by articulating that which is ubiquitous but unspoken, or you might say that she deserves kudos because she managed to say with wit and courage what most of us are too cowardly or silly to admit. Usually when authors manage to do this—write powerfully and passionately about a

important and universal topic—they are rewarded.

Not so with Parker. Parker has been slammed for at least thirty years. One recent critic complained that Parker had “no disinterestedness, no imagination,” and another bows low to introduce Parker with the gallant phrase “The span of her work is narrow and what it embraces is often slight.” It’s clear, however, that such critics write not out of their own convictions but out of their own prejudices. How else could they have read Parker with such blinkered vision?

Parker’s work is anything—anything—but slight, concerning as it does life, death, marriage, divorce, love, loss, dogs, and whisky. Given the comprehensive nature of her catalog, it is clear that the only important matters untouched by Parker boil down to the impact of microchip technology, sports, and cars. And if you look carefully at her prose, Parker does deal with cars—if only in passing—and only those passing in the fast lane.

Not that Parker had a great wish to be counted among Those Who Appeal to the Well-Read. Her portrait of literary types, in both her fiction and her nonfiction, is about as flattering as a broken tooth. In another previously uncollected sketch, “Professional Youth,” we are introduced to “one of the leading boy authors, hailed alike by friends and relatives as the thirty-one-year-old child wonder”—uncannily resembling his modern counterparts, who continue to make up the vast population of large parties in large cities celebrating small achievements. Parker informs us about the way in which the junior author declares his greatness and originality:

Perhaps you have read his collected works, that celebrated five-inch shelf. As is no more than fair, his books—*Annabelle Takes to Heroin*, *Gloria’s Neckings*, and *Suzanne Sobers Up*—deal with the glamorous adventures of our young folks. Even if you haven’t read them, though, there is no need for you to go all hot and red with nervous embarrassment when you are presented to their author. . . . He has the nicest, most reassuring way of taking it all cozily for granted that not a man or a woman and but few children in these loosely United States could have missed a word that he has written. . . .

And what exactly is the original contribution to thought made by this radical young band of renegade writers?

They come clean with the news that war is a horrible thing, that injustice still exists in many parts of the globe even to this day, that the very rich are apt to sit appreciably prettier than the very poor. Even the tenderer matters are not smeared over with romance for them. They have taken a calm look at the marriage thing and they are there to report that it is not always a lifelong trip to Niagara Falls. You will be barely able to stagger when the evening is over. In fact, once you have heard the boys settling things it will be no surprise to you if any day now one of them works it all out that there is nothing like this Santa Claus idea.

Not that reading fares all that much better than writing. Parker implies that language should be considered a controlled substance, parceled out according to need and only in small amounts. Listen to what, in her classic late-night-alone monologue “The Little Hours,” she has to say about what she might call the “gorgeous” effects of books taken at a high dosage:

Reading—there’s an institution for you. Why, I’d turn on the light and read, right this minute if reading weren’t what contributed toward driving me here. I’ll show it. God, the bitter misery that reading works in this world! Everybody knows that—everybody who is everybody. All the best minds have been off reading for years. Look at the swing La Rochefoucauld took at it. He said that if nobody had ever learned to read, very few people would be in love. There was

man for you, and that's what *he* thought of it. Good for you, La Rochefoucauld; nice going
boy. I wish I'd never learned to read. I wish I'd never learned to take off my clothes. Then
wouldn't have been caught in this jam at half-past four in the morning. If nobody had ever
learned to undress, very few people would be in love. No, his is better. Oh, well, it's a man's
world.

"If nobody had ever learned to undress, very few people would be in love" is one of Parker's wit
lines. It is not her autobiography. When an author's words are confused with her deeds, they too often
act as substitutions for a truly conscientious consideration of her work and life. Yes, Parker married
a few times, divorced a few times, drank, and wrote her heart out. Except for the astonishing ability with
which she completed this last task, she lived a life much like those of the other writers of her day.
It seems odd, then, for an article written on the centenary of her birth (in *The New Yorker*, ironically
enough) despairingly to announce the shocking discovery that for Parker "success did not bring
happiness."

Why this prevailing wish to preserve Parker as a twentieth-century version of Dickens's Miss
Havisham, a phantom swaying over the ghostly remains of the Algonquin Round Table, murmuring
rhyming verse to herself, alone and abandoned? Why the wish to see her long life as a failure of the
will to die rather than the triumph of a will to survive? Perhaps because the idea of a successful
woman writer, one who deflated daily the pretensions of the world around her with a stilet
of irreverence aimed at the hypocrisies of the cultural avant-garde, is unnerving even in this day and age.
Why else preserve not the image of a wickedly laughing woman who enjoyed her heart's rush into the
territories where angels feared to tread, but the vision of a sad, unfunny used up little old lady? (Who
was that little old lady, anyway? Certainly not Parker. At seventy Parker wanted to start writing
a column for *Esquire* and to publish a new collection of stories.)

On a bad day it's not hard to dream up a conspiracy plot which demands that all women writers who
speak successfully with a satirical tongue get lacerated critically or, worse, that such women are
presented as sad, shriveled shells of frivolous femininity, or—worse still, worst ever—that women
who don't act nicely *get left alone*. But then such bad days are usually provoked by the realization that
the woman writer is still regarded by certain critics as an intellectual and moral idiot because she
doesn't write about fly fishing or pontificate on the bounty of the world so lovingly created (by me
need we add?) as her playground.

But Dorothy Parker was not meant to be Betty Crocker; the joys of womanhood were not on her
agenda.

The complications, delights, humor, and frustrations of womanhood were, however, unflinchingly
examined by Parker. Her business was to make fun of the ideal, whatever it was, and trace the split
between the vision of a woman's life as put forth by the social script and the way real women live
their real lives. The ordinary is the very heart of her material. It is the essence of much of her humor.
"Dusk Before Fireworks," for example, we are privy to the following timeless exchange between
a "very good-looking young man indeed, shaped to be annoyed," and a "temperately pretty" woman who
"half a year before . . . had been sweeter to see," which takes place after the beleaguered girlfriend has
just protested a little too much: "You know I haven't got a stitch of jealousy in me. Jealous! Good
heavens, if I were going to be jealous, I'd be it about someone worth while, and not about any silly
stupid, idle, worthless, selfish, hysterical, vulgar, promiscuous, sex-ridden—"

Delicately annoyed, the young man stops her tirade with the word "Darling!" Using the term as a
means of punctuation rather than a declaration of affection, he interrupts her only to ask the age-old

question:

“Why do you want to work up all this? I watched you just sit there and deliberately taunt yourself into it, starting right out of nothing. Now what’s the idea of that? Oh, good Lord, what’s the matter with women, anyway?”

“Please don’t call me ‘women,’ ” she said.

“I’m sorry, darling,” he said. “I didn’t mean to use bad words.” He smiled at her. She felt her heart go liquid, but she did her best to be harder won.

The gap between how life is dressed up to appear and what it looks like underneath its fancy trimmings is the gap where interesting writing begins, especially when that writing is satiric. The female satirist makes some people nervous. They don’t feel all that easy around a woman who puts her “femininity” aside in order to make a point or a joke—and heaven help her if she wants to take a humorous perspective on a serious point.

But heaven help Parker, then, because she was nothing if not irreverent; nothing to her was sacrosanct save human dignity. For the woman in “The Little Hours” who finds herself awake as a kind of penance for having retired early, in bed with only La Rochefoucauld for company, Parker can offer a virtual litany of irreverence. Listen to how well she mimics the authoritative voice, only to slash it into pieces with the edge of reality; listen to the way she demonstrates her perfect knowledge of the line (making reference to, among others, Shakespeare, Browning, Milton, Marvell, Keats, Shelley, and Walter Savage Landor). Only after establishing proficiency in that most acceptable of lofty literary languages does Parker go on to savage its meaning by tossing it all into the blender:

This above all, to thine own self be true and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. Now they’re off. And once they get started, they ought to come like hot cakes. Let’s see. Ah, what avail the sceptered race and what the form divine, when ever virtue, every grace, Rose Aylmer, all were thine. Let’s see. They also serve who only stand and wait. If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind? Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. Silent upon a peak in Darien. Mrs. Porter and her daughter wash their feet in soda-water. And Agatha’s Arth is a hug-the-hearth, but my true love is false. Why did you die when lambs were cropping, you should have died when apples were dropping. Shall be together, breathe and ride so one day more am I deified, who knows but the world will end tonight. And he shall hear the stroke of eight and not the stroke of nine. They are not long, the weeping and the laughter; love and desire and hate I think will have no portion in us after we pass the gate. But none, I think do there embrace. I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree. I think I will not harm myself today. Ay tank Ay go home now.

Smart as a kick in the shins and as on target as a stealth flyer, maybe Parker is more concerned with being considered witty than with being considered nice, especially if “nice” is synonymous with “agreeable” and “orthodox.” It’s tough to be funny when you have to be nice, and Parker made it her business to be funny. Readers clearly adore her humor; critics have often disparaged it as shrill and self-indulgent. This can be put into perspective, however, when we realize that women who argue against their own subjugation are called shrill and those who point out the absurdities in life without offering an accompanying twelve-step program to fix it all up are deemed ethically irresponsible. A recent critic charmingly claimed that Parker remained “morally a child” all of her life. Parker wrote many things, but naive wasn’t among them, and the idea of her suffering from a case of moral arrested development because she occupied her time in confronting emotional and social issues can hardly be

regarded as a rational argument.

~~If Parker's work can be dismissed as narrow and easy, then so can the work of Austen, Eliot, and Woolf. Now that it's mentioned, their writing was also dismissed as small prose-potatoes for quite some time. Maybe Parker is in good company there in the crowded margins, along with all the other literary paragons of her sex. Aphra Behn didn't get cut much critical slack, either, when she was writing social satire in the 1670s; and like many women writers after her, she was said to have been unencumbered by the necessity of being ladylike.~~

(Wasn't it Behn who wrote in an introduction to one of her plays that she appeared as a woman, not as a playwright, to her critics, and that often her work was attacked for one reason alone: it "had no other misfortune but that of coming out for a woman's: had it been owned by a man, though the most dull, unthinkably rascally scribbler in town, it had been a most admirable" piece of writing? Surely the same can be claimed for Parker. This leads me to think that perhaps Parker should be pictured seated at a table with these, her literary predecessors, rather than chained by the ankle and fixed in one amber moment at the restaurant of a middling Manhattan hotel surrounded by the boys. Perhaps we should place Parker among her peers, not merely her contemporaries. Surely Behn, Austen, Eliot, and Woolf have more in common with Parker than Benchley ever did, even if we imagine that Parker would have rather played with Robert than with Aphra.)

Parker can be summed up as a writer of depth and substance; to hiss merely that she was a rapid burn-out case is to sneer, when what is called for is prolonged and sincere applause. It's like saying that Virginia Woolf was melancholic, George Eliot couldn't handle her relationships, and Jane Austen wasn't much fun at a dance: you'd imagine that throwing rocks at the glass houses of major writers would get tiring after a while and certain critics would pack up their pebbles, heading home, where at least in their sleep they could do little harm. The trajectory of Parker's critical acceptance has often been charted far below that of her popular acclaim, a curious reversal of the situation of many other mid-twentieth-century writers, who are so often pushed to the front of the group by their very own personal critics, the authors looking a great deal like reluctant children, aware of their limitations who are shoved onto the stage by aggressively solicitous parents eager for them to perform so that their own talents can be validated.

With Parker, the job is simplified. There is no need to resurrect her, because she has remained an author whose work has continued to sell strongly year after year, her readership gleefully resistant to the condescension of literary types who damn her with faint praise. But there is now, as there is ever so often, a need to re-establish her footing in the "canon." The stories collected here are evidence of that. The fact that these works have captured the flag of the reading world's attention and held it since 1944, when the first *Portable Dorothy Parker* was published, is additional evidence, should it be needed, of her strength and originality.

That Parker is brutally funny is no joke: the unforgiving nature of the humor she directed not only towards herself but towards any figures who took themselves too seriously is her trademark. Her wit is not a surprise to those who have read more than two or three of her works, whether stories, poems, plays, or reviews; the patterns of her humor become quickly familiar even to her new readers, since the effects of her style depend not so much on the ambush of the unexpected as on the anticipation of the inevitable.

You know that the woman—cleverly named Dorothy Parker by the author—in the 1928 *New Yorker* story "The Garter," newly collected here, is best friends with the women in Parker's better-known monologues "A Telephone Call," "The Little Hours," and "The Waltz." When her garter breaks as she sits alone in the middle of a party, "a poor, heartsick orphan . . . in the midst of a crowd," she must

“To think of a promising young life blocked, halted, shattered by a garter! In happier times, I might have been able to use the word ‘garter’ in a sentence. Nearer, my garter thee, nearer to thee.” At that point, of course, she’s off and running once again, with the applause and hollers of the audience in a mere blur:

It doesn’t matter; my life’s over, anyway. I wonder how they’ll be able to tell when I’m dead. It will be a very thin line of distinction between me sitting here holding my stocking, and just a regulation dead body. . . . If I could have just one more chance, I’d wear corsets. Or else I’d go without stockings, and play I was the eternal Summer girl. Once they wouldn’t let me into the Casino at Monte Carlo because I didn’t have any stockings on. So I went and found new stockings, and then came back and lost my shirt. Dottie’s Travel Diary: or Highways and Byways in Picturesque Monaco, by One of Them. I wish I were in Monte Carlo right this minute. I wish I were in Carcassonne. Hell, it would look like a million dollars to me to be on St. Helena. . . . Suppose somebody asks me to dance. I’ll just have to rock my head and say “No spik Inglese,” that’s all. Can this be me, praying that nobody will come near me?

If Parker isn’t sure that it’s her, we can reassure her on the matter: the voice is virtuoso Parker, and “The Garter” is one of her best monologues.

You know, too, that the supercilious mother in “Lolita” will be undone by her predatory envy towards the daughter who happily marries the man coveted by the mother herself; when the wise narrator informs the reader at the story’s conclusion that Lolita’s mother was “not a woman who easily abandoned hope,” you know that the mother’s hope is a poisonous one, aimed to strike at her daughter’s success. You know that the wise older woman in “Advice to the Little Peyton Girl” will herself duplicate the unwise habits of the younger woman seeking her advice, that she cannot live on the counsel she passes along. Perhaps, Parker implies, it is impossible for a flesh-and-blood human being to be as coolly manipulative, controlling, and controlled as thirty-nine-ish Miss Marion appears to be when she suggests to her nineteen-year-old friend Sylvie Peyton that she not permit herself “become insecure,” and that she conquer her fears that her boyfriend will leave her by being “always calm.” Miss Marion coos, “You must wait, Sylvie, and it’s a bad task. You must not telephone him again, no matter what happens. Men cannot admire a girl who—well, it’s a hard word, but I must say it—pursues them. . . . Talk to him gaily and graciously when you see him, and never hint of the sorrow he has caused you. Men hate reminders of sadness.”

Who would like to bet there and then that, after the little Peyton girl has left Miss Marion alone with her own needy demons, the coolly collected older woman will not catastrophically pick up her telephone—more than once in the space of a few minutes—to call a certain Mr. Lawrence? Are we shocked to hear her inner voice send up the familiar lament “Oh, he said he’d call, he said he’d call. He said there was nothing the trouble, he said of course he’d call. Oh, he said so.” All the good advice is invalidated in a shadowy, lonely late afternoon for a single woman approaching forty.

In presenting the pattern for examination, Parker exploits the apparently trivial—telephone calls, social invitations—in order first to extract, and then to reveal, a theory concerning the large implications of the difference between the sexes. The theory goes something like this, as she put it in a 1957 story titled “The Banquet of Crow”: “Two people can’t go on and on and on, doing the same things year after year, when only one of them likes doing them . . . and still be happy.” It’s a simple statement, but not an easy one to live through, especially for the likes of Miss Marion or, Parker implies, for the rest of us who cannot mummify our emotions.

You need not have read much Parker to know how these stories will turn out, but then her skill does

not depend on the breathless rush towards the unknown but instead on the breathless rush towards the known—even, or especially, when that which is known is what should be known and avoided. The voraciously vulnerable woman will be hurt; the casually unfaithful man will call another more-than-willing victim to his side; the shopgirl who longs for jewels in a window will learn just how far from her reach these pearls lie; the son of a selfish mother will turn up on her doorstep hoping for unselfishness; the woman who dances with a lout will have her instep stepped on and will keep on waltzing.

The waltzing woman will inevitably keep her subtext to herself, and let her partner in on only those phrases he will be able to endure, telling him, “I was watching you do it when you were dancing before. It’s awfully effective when you look at it.” She then goes on to tell us what she really thinks and it isn’t as winsome as what he hears:

It’s awfully effective when you look at it. I bet I’m awfully effective when you look at me. My hair is hanging along my cheeks, my skirt is swaddling about me, I can feel the cold damp on my brow. I must look like something out of “The Fall of the House of Usher.” This sort of thing takes a fearful toll of a woman my age. And he worked up his little step himself, he with his degenerate cunning.

Not that the reader is certain, by the story’s end, whose voice is in ascendancy. The man is a figure to be satirized internally, perhaps; but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep your arms around him just the same. The twinned-voice belongs to a woman who laughs at her partner but doesn’t quite want to let him go. It’s sad, Parker knows it’s sad, and you know it’s sad when Parker writes it. And yet we laugh.

Parker’s characters are in most danger—and are most dangerous—when they threaten to break the silence. When the young woman in “New York to Detroit” calls to demand some verbal reassurance, she gets only the literalization of the bad connection that has no doubt existed between the lovers for months before his departure from Manhattan. We flinch to hear her say, no doubt against all her better instincts, “Darling, it hurts so terribly when they ask me about you, and I have to say I don’t—” only to have him reply, “This is the damndest, lousiest connection I ever saw in my life. . . . What hurts? What’s the matter?” The repetition of her sentiment more than undermines its effectiveness; it renders her speech so useless that she attempts surrender: “I said, it hurts so terribly when people ask me about you . . . and I have to say—Oh, never mind. Never mind.” But she can’t quite give up, and asks him for some sweetness to get her through the night—only to have him ring off to join a bunch of his friends who have just dropped by for a party. If you have to ask for love, according to Parker, you won’t get it; but who, according to Parker, can manage to go through life without asking for love?

When she writes about a woman waiting for a telephone call, anyone who has ever waited by the phone can understand what Parker’s character is putting herself through, sensing the ferocity of the struggle against speech when words can only lead to further ruin:

I must think about something else. This is what I’ll do. I’ll put the clock in the other room. Then I can’t look at it. If I do have to look at it, then I’ll have to walk into the bedroom, and that will be something to do. Maybe, before I look at it again, he will call me. I’ll be so sweet to him, if he calls me. If he says he can’t see me tonight, I’ll say, “Why, that’s all right, dear. Why, of course it’s all right.” I’ll be the way I was when I first met him. Then maybe he’ll like me again. I was always sweet, at first. Oh, it’s so easy to be sweet to people before you love them. . . . They don’t like you to tell them they’ve made you cry. They don’t like you to tell them you’re unhappy because of them. If you do, they think you’re possessive and exacting.

And then they hate you. They hate you whenever you say anything you really think. You
~~always have to keep playing little games. Oh, I thought we didn't have to; I thought this was~~
big I could say whatever I meant. I guess you can't, ever. I guess there isn't ever anything big
enough for that.

Writing with the full force of true passion—writing the way this character speaks—Parker had
indeed been chastised for believing that the literary world was big enough to let her say, in all honesty,
whatever she meant. Even as her character misgauges her beloved, so did Parker misgauge a gang
of critics who sought to punish her for the authenticity and lack of pretense in her writing. And yet even
as her character makes us look at ourselves, and makes us the laugh in the mirror image presented, she
does Parker hold a glass up to life, lightly. She wins, finally, because her success affords her the luxury
of a laugh.

—Regina Barreca

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

CRITICISM

- Bunkers, Suzanne L. " 'I am Outraged Womanhood': Dorothy Parker as Feminist and Social Critic." *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 4 (1978): 25-35.
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- Capron, Marion. "Dorothy Parker." *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*. Edited by Malcolm Cowley. New York: Viking, 1957. Reprinted in *Women Writers at Work*. Edited by George Plimpton. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Case, Frank. *Tales of a Wayward Inn*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1938.
- Douglas, Ann. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995.
- Drennan, Robert, ed. *The Algonquin Wits*. New York: Citadel Press, 1968.
- Gaines, James R. *Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table*. New York: Harcourt, 1977.
- Grant, Jane. *Ross, The New Yorker, and Me*. New York: Raynel & Morrow, 1968.
- Harriman, Margaret Case. *The Vicious Circle: The Story of the Algonquin Round Table*. New York: Harcourt, 1977.

Kramer, Dale. *Ross and The New Yorker*. New York: Doubleday, 1951.

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Frewin, Leslie. *The Late Mrs. Dorothy Parker*. New York: Macmillan, 1986.

Keats, John. *You Might As Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970.

Meade, Marion. *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?* New York: Villard Books, 1988.

ANTHOLOGY

The Viking Portable Library: Dorothy Parker. New York: Viking, 1944. Republished as *The Indispensable Dorothy Parker*. New York: Book Society, 1944. Published again as *Selected Short Stories*. New York: Editions for the Armed Services, 1944. Revised and enlarged as *The Portable Dorothy Parker*. New York: Viking, 1973; revised, 1976. Republished as *The Collected Dorothy Parker*. London: Duck-worth, 1973.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1893 August 22: Born in West End, New Jersey, to J. Henry Rothschild and Eliza A. (Marston) Rothschild.
- 1897 July 20: Mother dies.
- 1900–1908 Student at Blessed Sacrament Convent, New York City, and Miss Dana’s School, Morristown, New Jersey. Formal education ends abruptly at age fourteen.
- 1913 December 28: Father dies.
- 1914 September: First published poem for money (\$12), “Any Porch,” *Vanity Fair*.
- 1915 First job, on *Vogue*; light verse published by Franklin P. Adams (F.P.A.).
- 1917–1920 Staff writer for *Vanity Fair*; April 1918–March 1920: replaces P. G. Wodehouse as drama reviewer.
- 1917 June 30: Marries Edwin (“Eddie”) Pond Parker II, of Hartford, Connecticut, descendant of prominent Congregational clergy family.
- 1919 June: Algonquin Round Table meets for the first time.
- 1920 January: *High Society* with Frank Crowninshield and George S. Chappell. Fired from *Vanity Fair* for outspoken criticism; named drama reviewer for *Ainslee’s* (May 1920–July 1923). Contributes free-lance verse and prose to *Life*.
- 1920–1923 Contributes essays and verse to *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Everybody’s*, and *Life*.
- 1922 April 30: Writes song for *No Siree!* and acts in production; writes “Nero” with Robert Benchley for *The 49ers*. Publishes first book, *Women I’m Not Married To; Men I’m Not Married To* (with F.P.A.). Fall: Has abortion.
- 1924 December 1: Play, *Close Harmony* (with Elmer Rice), opens.
- 1925 Collaborates on novel, *Bobbed Hair* (*Collier’s*, January 17). First film script, *Business Is Business* (with George S. Kaufman).
- 1926 *Enough Rope* (poems) becomes a best-seller; first European trip.
- 1927 October 1–March 1931: Book reviewer for *The New Yorker* as “Constant Reader”; also contributes fiction and poems. August 11: Marches against execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in Boston.

- 1928 March 31: Divorces Eddie Parker. *Sunset Gun* (collected poems) another best-seller; column for *McCall's*.
- 1929 "Big Blonde" wins O. Henry Award as year's best short story.
- 1930 *Laments for the Living* (collected fiction).
- 1931 *Death and Taxes* (collected poems); contributes drama reviews to *The New Yorker* and lyrics to *Shoot the Works* by Heywood Broun. On three-month contract for MGM in Hollywood.
- 1933 *After Such Pleasures* (collected stories) published.
- 1934 June 18: Marries Alan Campbell; contributes to dialogue of *Here Is My Heart* and *One Hour Late* (both Paramount). Helps organize Screen Writers Guild.
- 1935 Contributes to dialogue, *The Case Against Mrs. Ames*, *Mary Burns, Fugitive*; to screenplay construction, *Hands Across the Table*; and to treatment, *Paris in Spring* (all Paramount). Lyrics, *Big Broadcast of 1936* (Paramount).
- 1936 *Not So Deep as a Well* (collected poems); joint screenplays, *Three Married Men* and *Lady, Be Careful* (both Paramount) and *Suzy* (MGM); additional dialogue, *The Moon's Our Home* (Paramount). June: Helps found the Anti-Nazi League.
- 1937 Joint screenplay, *A Star Is Born*, for David Selznick; nominated for Academy Award for the screenplay; joint screenplay, *Woman Chases Man* (United Artists). Reports on Loyalist cause from Spain for *New Masses*.
- 1938 Joint screenplay, *Sweethearts* (MGM); *Trade Winds* (United Artists).
- 1939 *Here Lies* (collected stories) published.
- 1941 Joint screenplay, *Weekend for Three*; additional dialogue, *The Little Foxes* (both RKO).
- 1942 *Collected Stories*; joint original screenplay, *Saboteur* (Universal).
- 1944 *The Viking Portable Library: Dorothy Parker*, poems and stories chosen by Parker.
- 1947 Joint original story, *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* (Universal-International). Nominated for a second Academy Award, for best original story. May 27: Divorces Campbell.
- 1949 Joint screenplay, *The Fan* (20th Century-Fox). Play *The Coast of Illyria* (with Ross Evans) has three-week run in Dallas. Blacklisted in Hollywood.
- 1950 Remarries Alan Campbell; "Horsie" a basis for *Queen for a Day* (United Artists).
- 1952– Testimony against her before HUAC.
- 1953
- 1953 Play *The Ladies of the Corridor* (with Arnaud d'Usseau).
- 1955 Called before New York State joint legislative committee; pleads Fifth Amendment.
- 1956 Additional lyrics for *Candide* (musical).
- 1957– Book reviewer for *Esquire*; a total of 46 columns, 208 books
1963 reviewed.
- 1958 Marjorie Peabody Waite Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters. Publishes last short story, "Bolt Behind the Blue," in December *Esquire*.
- 1959 Inducted into American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1963 June 14: Alan Campbell dies, apparent suicide, age fifty-nine.
- 1963– Distinguished Visiting Professor of English, California State
1964 College at Los Angeles.
- 1964 Records stories and poems for Spoken Arts, Verve; publishes final magazine piece in December *Esquire*.
- 1965 *Short Story* anthology, co-edited with Frederick B. Shroyer.
- 1967 June 7: Discovered dead of a heart attack in her room at Hotel Volney, New York City, at age seventy-three.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The stories are republished here from the texts of their original sources except in those instances where Dorothy Parker herself emended them in subsequent collections. The original sources are noted at the end of each story; variants and emendations are noted below. Minor orthographic emendations have been silently incorporated throughout the collection.

“The Wonderful Old Gentleman” (1926) was originally subtitled “A Story Proving that No One Can Hate Like a Close Relative.” The subtitle was dropped when the story was first collected in *Laments for the Living* (1930) and subsequently in *The Viking Portable Library: Dorothy Parker* (1944).

“Lucky Little Curtis” (1927) was retitled simply “Little Curtis” in *Laments for the Living* and thereafter in the *Portable*.

“Long Distance” (1928), subtitled “Wasting Words, or an Attempt at a Telephone Conversation Between New York and Detroit,” was retitled “New York to Detroit” in *Laments for Living* and in the *Portable*.

“The Waltz” (1933): The \$50 figure at the end of the story was retained in Parker’s collection *After Such Pleasures* (1933) but changed to \$20 in Parker’s *Here Lies* (1939) and the *Portable*.

“The Custard Heart” first appeared in *Here Lies* (1939). Unlike her other stories, there was no original magazine publication.

“The Game” (1948) was co-authored by Ross Evans, Parker’s collaborator on the play *The Coast of Illyria* (1949).

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- <http://pittiger.com/lib/Horton-Halfpott--Or--The-Fiendish-Mystery-of-Smugwick-Manor--or--The-Loosening-of-M-Lady-Luggertuck-s-Corset.pdf>
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