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Spring 2011

### The Relevance and Controversy of Dorothy Parker's Works

Who is Dorothy Parker? The answer to such a question is often met with silence and blank stares. She appears in textbooks and anthologies, yet many people today have no idea who she was. Dorothy Parker was a satirist, poet, journalist and writer who wrote about what she knew- society. Most of her works revolved around controversial topics of the 1920s and 30s including: relationships between men and women, abortion and relationships among women. Such issues explored in her works were not only relevant to society at the time, but related to events in her own life as well. Therefore, it is important to understand Parker's own personal history, the history of the social issues of the 1920s and 30s and how she incorporated them into her works.

Dorothy Rothschild was born in New Jersey on August 22, 1893. She was born to a wealthy, Jewish family. Her mother died when she was only five years old. Two years later, her father remarried, only to have his new wife die after three years of marriage. As a young woman, Dorothy's career took off. At age 21, she sold her first poem to *Vanity Fair* and a few months later she joined the staff at *Vogue*. Two years later, she returned to *Vanity Fair* as a staff writer. Soon after, her personal life also began to blossom. In 1917, the 24 year old

met Edwin Pond Parker II, and they were married soon after. Unfortunately, he was in the army and the couple were separated by World War I.

Dorothy Parker continued to write criticism for *Vanity Fair*, where she became close friends with writers Robert Benchley and Robert E. Sherwood. They began to meet regularly for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City from 1919 to about 1929. More and more people began to join them and the group of wisecracking literary figures became known as The Algonquin Round Table. During this time, Parker also began to write for *The New Yorker*.

Later in her life, Parker became known for her witty short stories, poems, plays and screenplays. However, her personal life soon overshadowed her literary career. Her marriage to Edwin Parker ended in 1928 and while they were separated, she had numerous affairs, including one with the married Charles MacArthur. The relationship ended with a pregnancy and subsequent abortion. In 1934, she married screenwriter and actor Alan Campbell, whom she divorced and remarried. After Campbell's death, Parker was known as a lonely spinster and her depression and alcoholism became more public. She died of a heart attack, alone in her hotel room in 1967.

### **Tension in Relationships between Men and Women**

In the 1920s and early 30s, the relationships between men and women became particularly strained in America. The majority of the tension stemmed from early women's rights movements. Women were beginning to push to gain the same freedoms as men. They were finally entering universities and the

workforce. Via one of America's first sexual revolutions, women began to openly acknowledge their sexual desires and practices. Birth control and childcare services were made readily available to women, making their reproductive choices more convenient and acceptable. The law was also a source of tension between the sexes. When the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, women were given the right to vote and to have their valid political opinions heard. Women were therefore seen as full, but not equal, citizens.

During World War I, women were finally encouraged to enter the man's world. They joined the armed forces as nurses and entered the workforce, leaving their expected gender roles and taking over for men while they were at war. When the men returned, many women wanted to continue their work instead of returning to domestic life. Soon, women began to realize that they wanted freedoms in other areas of their lives. The 1920s and early 1930s also saw an increase in adultery and in conflict about income, both of which often led to divorce and were blamed on the liberties given to women.

The women's movement of the 1920s and 30s encouraged women to find their own identities instead of living in their husbands shadow. Women began to realize that they should have and that it was possible to obtain the same rights as men. Women who attained such freedoms had the ability and the courage to leave abusive and neglectful husbands. Many women identified only as wives and mothers and entered loveless marriages merely for financial security. Women writers like biographer Edna Yost wrote about how women are intellectuals too and that men and women should learn from each other. In her

article 'The Intelligent Sex', she says that both sexes should accept the intelligence of women and that women should work to be the best people they could be.

On the other hand, divorce rates also began to increase because of negative social forces and antifeminist attitudes. Some men thought that women should not have the same legal rights as men because they were 'politically handicapped' (Freedman 376) and lacked electoral experience. The rising standard of living and larger amounts of leisure time of some women who were not involved in the advancement of women led to a declining birth rate, as well as an increase in divorces. Though, women entering the workforce had an effect on the increase in divorces; some husbands simply did not want their wives to work. It seemed to them that women could not win. The 1920s and 30s saw a decline in the authority of fathers and husbands and an increase in 'defiant' women, which did not make for very happy marriages.

Divorce was a major concern in the '20s and '30s. Many found themselves divorced or remarried, including Dorothy Parker. Her first marriage was to a Wall Street stockbroker named Edwin Pond Parker II. They were married when they were both 24 years old and got divorced by the age of 35. Edwin entered the United States Army and worked as an ambulance driver during World War One. Soon after his return home, he and Dorothy were legally separated. At this time, no-fault divorce was not a legal option, so women had to have proof of abuse or neglect. The biggest reasons for their divorce was Edwin's addiction to alcohol and morphine and his subsequent anger problems.

Parker once joked that her reason for marrying was to leave her stigmatized Jewish last name behind.

Dorothy Parker had multiple problematic relationships with young, angry men throughout her life. She was married two more times after Edwin, though both times were to the same man, writer Alan Campbell. Alan was a bisexual actor and screenwriter who was eleven years younger than Dorothy. Their relationship was a rocky one; Parker and Campbell were married the first time in 1934, divorced in 1947, remarried by 1950, separated three years later and reunited again in 1956. The last time they reconciled, they stayed together until his death in 1963.

Parker's complicated relationships helped to fuel her anger, depression and alcoholism, but they enabled her to write her greatest works. Her impressions of men and relationships are made very clear in the humorous poem, 'Chant for Dark Hours':

Some men, some men  
 Cannot pass a  
 Book shop.  
 (Lady, make your mind up, and wait your life away.)

Some men, some men  
 Cannot pass a  
 Crap game.  
 (He said he'd come at moonrise, and here's another day!)

Some men, some men  
 Cannot pass a  
 Bar-room.  
 (Wait about, and hang about, and that's the way it goes.)

Some men, some men  
 Cannot pass a  
 Woman.  
 (Heaven never send me another one of those!)

Some men, some men  
 Cannot pass a  
 Golf course.  
 (Read a book, and sew a seam, and slumber if you can)

Some men, some men  
 Cannot pass a  
 Haberdasher's.  
 (All your life you wait around for some damn man!)

1944

Dorothy Parker writes about what 'some men' are like and gives personal commentary from her own life. She straightforwardly reveals her observations about the differences between men and women and each sex's expectations for relationships. Some of Parker's observations are based on personal experiences. Dorothy had a history of being with men who did whatever they pleased; in fact, it was the main reason for her first divorce.

In the 1920s and 30s, relationships between men and women were typically established so that the woman lived in the shadow of her husband's and accepted his actions, whether they be positive or negative for the relationship. As Parker writes, if a man wanted to go to a bookstore, golf course or a haberdasher's (a merchant who sells men's clothes), then the woman would go and wait around for him. If he wanted to participate in risky activities like excessive drinking, gambling or a man wanted to have an affair, a woman had to accept it; such activities were not grounds for a divorce in the American legal

system. Parker's main point in 'Chant for Dark Hours' is that relationships, for the most part, were not about partnerships and women were expected to be idle and did not have the opportunity to live her life as she pleased.

The poem 'Men' also displays Parker's cynical attitudes towards men:

They hail you as their morning star  
Because you are the way you are.  
If they return the sentiment,  
They'll try to make you different;  
And once they have you, safe and sound,  
They want to change you all around.  
Your moods and ways they put a curse on;  
They'd make of you another person.  
They cannot let you go your gait;  
They influence and educate.  
They'd alter all that they admired.  
They make me sick, they make me tired.

1944

Parker's poem starts off cheerful and ends on a more contemptuous note. The tone of the poem is similar to the way her romantic relationships ran their course. Love took over every aspect of their lives and both parties were happy. But as time went on, bitterness and contempt for one another ensued. Parker's moroseness is most apparent when she says 'They make me sick, they make me tired'. At a certain point, she gave up on trying to find happiness with another person. Past experiences convinced her that it was not possible.

'Men' may be a biased representation of men, but in the 1920s and 30s, such relationships and interactions were a reality for many women. Some men hindered women from becoming more independent and wanted women to act according to the socially prescribed gender roles. In public, women were

supposed to want to do what men wanted them to. Parker's poem paints the picture that boyfriends or husbands encouraged women in the beginning of their relationships, and over time, began to assert their authority over them.

Dorothy Parker also wrote about women being the source of their own personality changes in a relationship. Her poem 'Indian Summer' demonstrates her views of relationships that she had acquired over time:

In youth, it was a way I had  
To do my best to please,  
And change, with every passing lad,  
To suit his theories.

But now I know the things I know,  
And do the things I do;  
And if you do not like me so,  
To hell, my love, with you!

1944

Again, Parker uses her blunt style and wit to describe a common theme amid relationships between men and women in the 1920s and 30s. She writes how in her own relationships, she altered her behavior and was easily influenced by the ideas of her boyfriends or husbands. She wanted to be well liked and to be what he wanted her to be. Parker says in the poem that now that she is older, has been divorced, she has discovered who she is as a woman; she does not need to pretend to be something she is not. In the last two lines, she essentially says that if a man does not like her for the person she really is, then she wants nothing to do with him.

The issue described in 'Indian Summer' was not only a problem in Dorothy Parker's life, but it occurs in the lives of many women, even today. It takes life



experiences, happiness and heartbreak for a woman to fully understand who she is and what she wants out of a relationship. Dorothy Parker says she had to marry two different men and break up with many more to comprehend.

All of the experience she had mentioned led Dorothy Parker to become more cynical as she got older. Her poem 'General Review of the Sex Situation' is one of her more pessimistic takes on the men and women:

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

1944

The language of 'General Review of the Sex Situation' is not as direct as some of Parker's other poems. She begins her lyrical rant with what we may read today as stereotypes about gender, but at the time they were the norm. She says that women appreciate a relationship with one loving partner; they live to find a true love. A man on the other hand, looks for sex with a lot of different, new women. Parker writes that women, as she has said numerous times, live to serve their husbands and exist in their shadow, but men get bored quickly and do not invest much feeling in the woman who practically lives for him. She makes women seem like victims, when actually she is criticizing society and the roles it forces women into.

Parker asks, 'What earthly good can come of it?' and when we look at her relationships, there was not much good that did come out of them. Her marriages ended in death or divorce and she had no surviving children. Her relationships with self-destructive men steered her towards a self-destructive lifestyle. The only relatively successful relationship she was able to sustain with a man was with her good friend, and fellow Algonquin Round Table member, Robert Benchley. Their relationship, however, remained nonphysical, as they were collaborators and he was married to the same woman until his death (Meade). Unfortunately, Mrs. Dorothy Parker died all alone in a hotel room.

Her relationships may have been far from perfect, but that does not mean that Dorothy Parker did not have her regrets. 'On Being a Woman' is one poem that exemplifies some of her remorse:

Why is it, when I am in Rome,  
I'd give an eye to be at home,  
But when on native earth I be,  
My soul is sick for Italy?

And why with you, my love, my lord,  
Am I spectacularly bored,  
Yet do you up and leave me—then  
I scream to have you back again?

1944

Dorothy Parker describes what many women felt after the end of a relationship and divorce; it was better to have someone you did not love (and be financially solvent) than to be alone. Parker showed remorse for some of her own past decisions. She especially expressed regret with regard to her first

marriage to Edwin, and even made the decision to keep his last name. Though, the poem makes it clear that in Edwin's case, she have just wanted him because they were no longer together.

'On Being a Woman' may also explain why Parker went back to her second husband Alan Campbell. To keep from having the same regrets as her first marriage, she gave her second marriage a second (and third) try. Her poem also explains her decision to go back to him when she describes how bored she is with her love. Relationships look better when no longer existing; Campbell may have looked like a better option when she did not have him anymore.

Men and women had an extremely tense relationship in the time of Dorothy Parker. There seemed to be a battle between the housewife and the businessman. Though the battle has been an ongoing one, even to this day, the women of the 1920s and 30s stood up for themselves and worked to give women liberties in their relationships that modern women enjoy today.

### **Abortion: Legal and Social Stigma**

Divorce was not the only issue on people's minds; abortion was another topic of concern for American society in the 1920s and 1930s. The procedures were not only controversial, but the majority of them were also against the law. It is important for modern readers to keep in mind that because most abortions were considered criminal, the information that has been obtained about them is limited. Many abortions were kept off the books due to their illegal nature and some women performed them at home to keep from being caught.

As the number of abortions began to increase considerably in the 1920s and 30s, the birthrate began to decline. The crude birthrate was estimated to be under 18 in the mid-1930s, which means that less than 18 babies were born to 1,000 people per year. The crude birthrate was a dramatic change from the rate only 30 years previous, which was 30 births per 1,000 people per year; abortion was a large contributor to the dramatic drop in birth rate. In larger cities, abortions were more common than in rural areas, and it was even reported in some cities that there were more abortions than there were childbirths (Sauer 60). In New York City alone, one doctor claimed to know at least 75 full-time abortionists in the 1930s (Sauer 61).

Americans' attitudes towards abortion were split between prolife and prochoice, much like they are today. The majority of medical professionals, Christian leaders and those involved in the birth control movement referred to abortion as "child murder". There was only one reason in the United States for which an abortion was legally vindicated: therapeutic reasons. If it was dangerous to the woman's health to continue with her pregnancy, it could be terminated. "Therapeutic", however, was a term that was vague and open to interpretation, and frequently, if children were conceived outside of "wedlock", doctors would fabricate health reasons for an abortion. On the other hand, many authors and critics publicly chastised abortion, but felt indifferent to or condoned them, several having had abortions themselves.

The majority of the women procuring abortions in the 1920s and 1930s were white, married women and the abortions were obtained for numerous

reasons. Women who were less educated tended to have more abortions than the well educated, but religious beliefs had little to do with hindering or nurturing abortion rates. Many working-class women used abortion as a form of birth control. Contraceptives were meant to be convenient but were not made readily available to many women. During the years of the Great Depression, women had a hard time caring for the children they already had at home and battered women did not want to bring children into abusive relationships. Women in the workforce wanted to keep their jobs and becoming a mother would not permit that to happen (Reagan 135-37). In some cases, adoption was not a valid option or women were not informed of alternatives to abortion.

As a result of the unlawful status of abortions that were sought for reasons other than for the woman's health, women were going to great lengths to procure unsafe abortions. About ten percent of wealthy white women and thirty percent of lower income black and white women turned to dangerous self-induced abortions (Reagan 137). Some of the self-induced abortion methods included: physical exertion, receiving blows to the stomach, inserting a sharp object into the uterus and consuming substances that were harmful to the unborn child. Rather than taking matters into their own hands, many women turned to professional abortionists and midwives to perform illegal procedures, which were safer options than producing them on their own.

Parker was one author who was not afraid to talk about the realities of abortion. For her, the controversial issue hit very close to home. In 1922, soon after her marriage to Edwin Parker ended, Parker met Charles MacArthur, a

playwright, screenplay writer and newspaper writer. Charles was friends and later roommates with her fellow Algonquin Round Table member and close friend Robert Benchley. The two began an affair and fell in love. Unfortunately, Charles was still married and had mistresses, besides Dorothy, on the side. Their short lived affair ended in 1923 with an unwanted pregnancy, a subsequent abortion and Parker's first suicide attempt via wrist-cutting. (Fitzpatrick & Meade 36).

Parker did not display her depression in public. In fact, she was later quoted as saying; "It serves me right for putting all my eggs in one bastard" (Keats 90). She means that she fell in love and when MacArthur did not love her in the same way, it ended in heartbreak; because he was married, Parker thought she should have seen the pain coming. When she found out she was pregnant, her lover did not seem to care. Even though her comment was veiled in wit, Dorothy was not afraid to speak openly about a procedure that was not only stigmatized, but also illegal, as the abortion was not performed for therapeutic reasons.

One of Dorothy Parker's short stories, "Mr. Durant", comments on abortion, without ever using the word *abortion*. The story is written in the perspective of Mr. Durant, a manager at a rubber factory. Mr. Durant is a husband and father who has a clandestine affair with Rose, a stenographer, who is 29 years his junior. Later, Rose comes to Mr. Durant to explain that she is pregnant:

[...] Rose had come weeping to his office [...]

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."

1924

Mr. Durant is more annoyed with Rose than he is sympathetic. He also chooses to describe Rose as being "in trouble", not pregnant or expecting. Once he got what he wanted from Rose, she became useless and her child became a problem for him. The situation is an immense difficulty for Mr. Durant. His job could possibly be on the line if his coworkers and boss found out. If Durant's wife and children found out, his marriage could also be in jeopardy. Like Dorothy Parker's lover Charles MacArthur, Durant is more concerned with saving himself than with Rose or the child. Mr. Durant comes up with abortion as the one solution to Rose being "in trouble":

Cases like this could be what people of the world called "fixed up"- New York society women, he understood, thought virtually nothing of it. This case could be fixed up, too.

[...]

Mr. Durant did not know whom to seek for information. He pictured himself inquiring of his intimates if they could tell him of "someone that this girl he had heard about could go to".[...]

To confide in one person would be confiding in at least one too

many. It was a progressing town, but still small enough for gossip to travel like a typhoon.

[...]

Mr. Durant was not directly concerned in the planning. He heard of it only through Rose, on the infrequent occasions when he had had to see her. [...] It would be twenty-five dollars.

1924

The sections provide a fascinating window into the issue of abortion and the controversy that surrounded it in the 1920s. As the short story was published only one year after Dorothy Parker's abortion, it leads modern readers to believe that the story has a connection to her own troubled relationship with Charles MacArthur. Like MacArthur, Mr. Durant left his lover as soon as he found out she was pregnant and continued having affairs and deceiving his wife and continued living as though nothing had happened.

When the story begins, Mr. Durant is mentally objectifying the body of a woman while riding on a streetcar. Next, the reader is taken back in time to his affair with Rose and her resulting abortion. The reader is once again taken back to the present, where Mr. Durant expresses his desire for the woman in the streetcar and for two more on his way home. Finally, Mr. Durant arrives home to his wife and two children. He has learned nothing from his affair with Rose. Rose becomes invisible and insignificant. Rose's life is flipped upside down by Mr. Durant's misogyny and she is left with shame.



Mr. Durant is depicted as an apathetic womanizer, who looks out for no one but himself. He lusts after any woman that passes and exercises his power over his wife when she calls him "Father". He will not even allow his children to keep a female dog in the house for fear it will attract all the male dogs. He tells his wife that once the dog has puppies, she will be repulsive.

When it comes to Rose's pregnancy, Mr. Durant wants the matter to be "fixed up". He is more worried about what his coworkers and his friends will say about his affair with Rose, than about what she is feeling. He is also concerned about the fact that the procedure is illegal. Mr. Durant gives Rose the twenty-five dollars for her abortion, sends her on her way and congratulates himself for being so kind in doing so. He dismisses Rose and no longer wants anything to do with her. Rose has to go through this ordeal alone, quit her job and move in with her sister, while Mr. Durant's life and reputation remain intact. Mr. Durant is Parker's example of how not to behave when dealing with an abortion; abortion is not an issue that is to be swept under the rug and both men and women are affected by it.

Another short story about abortion written by Parker is "Lady with a Lamp". The story is written as a conversation, as one busybody "friend" attempts to console Mona after she has had an abortion. Mona's part of the conversation, however, is not included in the text; the readers only have access to the words of her friend. Mona's friend is constantly trying to figure out whether Mona is tired or sick, but she has been in bed for ten days because Mona is recovering from her abortion. Again, the term *abortion* does not appear in the short story, though

it is implied in the speaker's dialogue. Readers knew exactly what Parker was referring to, without seeing the word on the page. Her abortion is made most clear when Mona's friend tells her she should marry and have children in the future:

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. Why Mona Morrison, are you crying?

1932

At the mere mention of children, Mona begins to cry, which happens multiple times throughout "Lady with a Lamp". She may be crying out of guilt or shame or embarrassment, but her friend chalks it up to a cold. The speaker probably knows why Mona is lying in bed, but in the 1930s, it was improper to mention abortion, even amongst friends. Her friend asks her if she is crying or needs a tissue, then proceeds to criticize her for not having a handkerchief and calls her an idiot.

It is also suggested that a man named Garry McVicker is that father of Mona's child, but he is nowhere to be found:

It looks too dreary here, without a flower in the room. Didn't Garry send you any? Oh, he didn't know you were sick. Well, doesn't he send you flowers anyway? Listen, hasn't he called up, all this time, and found out whether you were sick or not? Not in ten days? Well,

then, haven't you called and told him? Ah, now Mona, there *is* such a thing as being too much of a heroine. [...] Well, I'd just like to talk to that young man for a few minutes. After all, this is all *his* responsibility.

1932

Like Charles MacArthur, Garry is absent from the woman's bedside during and after her abortion. Instead, he is out having affairs with other women. It is unclear whether the speaker is based on a real person in Dorothy Parker's life. The story makes the reader wonder if Mrs. Parker felt that another woman was judging her for her decision to have an abortion, or if the speaker represents women in general.

Mona's friend is trying so hard to get her to tell her the truth about why she has been lying in bed for ten days, but Mona tries to keep the information to herself. The speaker has also discovered that the man who got Mona "in trouble", Gary, has left her to deal with it all alone. Her friend says that he should be there to support Mona, because, without him, Mona would not need to have an abortion in the first place. Everything the speaker says to Mona only makes her feel worse about her situation.

Though abortions were rather common in the 1920s and 30s, the speaker shows a lot of contempt for Mona. Her friend feigns compassion for Mona throughout the story, while chastising her in the same breath. She asks Mona who her doctor was and seems shocked when she hears it's her nerve specialist, because she never thought he'd "do a thing like—", and only a few lines later,

tells Mona that she did not have a choice. The speaker tells her that it would be unfair for the child to grow up in a home without married parents and that Mona would have to move away to hide her pregnancy. Her friend also admits that she saw Garry out with another woman, which makes Mona cry, and subsequently tells her not to be upset because no man is worth it. The speaker simply wants to revel in Mona's pain and to take part in gossip. Mona's illegal abortion would certainly provide the kind of salacious gossip that women in the 1930s were looking for.

Dorothy Parker's main argument in the short stories "Mr. Durant" and "Lady with a Lamp" is that the women who had abortions in 1920s and 30s America were voiceless and mistreated. As an author, and a woman who had an abortion, she wanted write poems and stories to give the women a voice. Many women were neglected by the men who got them pregnant. Money was thrown their way, and the women were left to "take care" of the problem and pick up the pieces of their lives, while the men had the ability to continue their lives as they chose. Society as a whole also victimized women who procured abortions. Whether it was considered morally or legally wrong, women were persecuted for their choices. Men and women alike forced their views upon the women and had little sympathy for them. Those who had abortions were a constant source of controversy, but were silenced by American society.

## **The Strain Among Women**

When the average person considers the Woman's Movement of the 1920s and 30s, there is a tendency to discuss the tension that existed between men and women and the issues, like abortion, that individual women faced and to completely disregard the strain among women. With the burgeoning fight for rights over their personal relationships, bodies and legal claims, women were beginning to figure out exactly what it meant to be a "modern" woman. Was a modern woman supposed to be a wife, mother, virgin, employee, politician, sexually liberated, or a combination of them all? Each woman had a different idea as to what the answer to the question was.

Women were torn between the traditional patriarchal construction and the modern independent life. Because of urban development and the growth of a consumer culture, women were expected by their husbands to stay at home and take care of the family. If they did work, more often than not, they were employed as secretaries, stenographers, teachers and nurses and were expected to quit their jobs as soon as they were married.

Modern women in the 1920s and 30s, however, began to think that women who were housewives and stay-at-home mothers, even by choice, were supposed to go out into the world and obtain higher education and a career. Some women believed women who stayed home were wasting away the opportunities gained by the growing.

On the other hand, women of the traditional construction criticized socially, sexually and politically progressive women. By entering the workforce or a life in

politics, they were considered invaders of the man's world. The liberated women, particularly flappers, were often seen as promiscuous or immoral. (It is important to keep in mind that prostitutes and lesbians were subject to scrutiny by almost all men and women of the 1920s and 30s, but were usually not discussed in public because they typically concealed their identities to escape public scrutiny.)

Flappers were a great source of controversy in the 1920s. They were typically thin and purposefully displayed "boyish" features. Known for their bobbed hair and short dresses, these women had begun to take part in drinking, dancing in speakeasies, wearing a lot of makeup, smoking and engaging in illicit and premarital sexual activities. (Until the 1920s and 30s, such behavior by women was almost unheard of in public.) Drinking alcohol was publicly problematic not only because of the behaviors induced by drinking, but because of Prohibition, it was illegal. Due to the recently acquired legal rights and the advances in technology (i.e. the automobile) flappers had begun to advance in society and had much more leisure time. Flappers were considered both sensational and social deviants. Some men considered them to be too wild and saw them as women showing contempt for more traditional values and were less desirable as potential partners. Some women wanted to be them, while others were harshly critical. Society began to judge flappers as amoral, irresponsible and increasingly idle.

Dorothy Parker was one of the women who criticized both domestic women and flappers. As a writer for *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, Parker was used to writing for a female audience and was made familiar

with the many different kinds of American women. In an interview in 1965 with Marion Capron of the *Paris Review*, Parker was quoted as saying, "I'm a feminist, and God knows I'm loyal to my sex, and you must remember that from my very early days, when this city was scarcely safe from buffaloes, I was in the struggle for equal rights for women." As an educated, sexually uninhibited woman, Dorothy Parker wanted women to take advantage of the rights they had attained, but she is also famous for her mockery of the flapper lifestyle. It is possible that, as the one female founding members of the Algonquin Round Table and as one of the few female members of her field, she knew what women were capable of and held women to a high standard than men.

Parker's views of women and the growing tension present among women are apparent in her poem, "Women: A Hate Song". Though it was written four years before 1920, the poem has a lot to say about "modern" women, and represents the feelings that Dorothy Parker had about all women until the end of her life.

*I hate Women;  
They get on my nerves.*

There are the Domestic ones.  
They are the worst.  
Every moment is packed with Happiness.  
They breathe deeply  
And walk with large strides, eternally hurrying home  
To see about dinner.  
They are the kind  
Who say, with a tender smile, "Money's not everything."  
They are always confronting me with dresses,  
Saying, "I made this myself."  
They read Women's pages and try out the recipes.  
Oh, how I hate that kind of woman.

[...]

(1916)

The poem begins with Dorothy Parker's views of housewives. She says that they "are the worst". The domestic women are grouped together: there are no individuals. All domestic women are doing the same thing to please their families and to uphold the traditional patriarchal ideal of what a family should be. She says that their biggest concerns are getting dinner on the table and spending their days making dresses and doing unnecessary work. The domestic woman is always happy and claims that she does not work because there is more to life than money.

What is most interesting about this stanza is Parker's criticism of housewives looking at women's magazines- the very magazines she wrote for. In fact, "Woman: A Hate Song" was published in *Vanity Fair*. Not only was she criticizing other women, but she was criticizing herself. Here, Dorothy Parker is suggesting that the advertisers and magazine editors influenced women's ideas of what a woman should be. The magazines influenced how they should act, what they should wear and what recipes to cook. Parker is criticizing the women who buy into the hype of magazines and the "ideal" family life by implying that what appeared in magazines does not make for a perfect, happy family or perfect, happy life.

Later in the poem, Dorothy Parker goes on to describe how she hates "The Bundles of Nerves", women who are "always in Trouble", the "Well-informed ones", "the ones who simply cannot Fathom Why all the men are mad about them" and the "unfailingly Cheerful ones". She ends the poem by saying: "I



sometimes yearn to kill them. / Any jury could acquit me.” The stereotypical women Parker describes in her poem are depictions of “ideal” women. In a jury of their peers, the women would not receive much sympathy. Dorothy Parker is saying to her readers that these women lack personality and individuality and that all women should challenge the roles they are being forced into.

Dorothy Parker also showed contempt for women who thought money was everything and tried to present themselves as women of leisure (like the flappers were). In her short story “The Standard of Living”, the two main characters, Annabel and Midge represent the superficial women that Dorothy Parker criticized. The women work as stenographers, typical jobs for women at the time, and have become best friends. Their desks sit right next to each other, they eat lunch together everyday and they spend the majority of their spare time together. Most of the time, they share their time with two men, but almost never the same two men. Parker described them as:

[...] all that young office workers are besought not to do. They painted their lips and their nails, they darkened their lashes and lightened their hair, and scent seemed to shimmer from them. They wore thin, bright dresses, tight over their breasts and high on their legs, and tilted slippers, fancifully strapped. They looked conspicuous and cheap and charming.

(1941)

From Parker’s description, it sounds as though the women are trying to act like flappers. They dress in the similar short dresses, with excessive makeup.

They are a little too made up for work as stenographers; the girls are trying to get attention wherever they can get it and it is working.

The story continues with Annabel and Midge strutting down Fifth Avenue in New York City. As they window-shop, they enjoy the attention of the men they pass. The reader then learns of a game the girls love to play, especially while window-shopping. The game has many rules and the girls take the game very seriously. Basically, the game is to pretend that someone they know left them one million dollars in their will and stipulated that the girl must spend all of the money on herself. One day, they come across a string of pearls and they are appalled to learn that they cost a quarter of a million dollars. The necklace costs so much that even their imaginary standard of living is not enough to allow the girls to live the chic life they spend their time dreaming about. So, the girls pretend like they are too good to purchase the pearls, leave the store and raise the stakes of their game. To make themselves feel better, they pretend that someone left them ten million dollars in their will, so they could afford the pearls in their imaginations.

It is clear that the girls want to live extravagant lifestyles, but in reality, they are only pretending to be sophisticated with their nice clothes and superior attitudes. Their attitudes towards other leave a lot to be desired and Parker informs us that they still live at home with their families and live paycheck to paycheck. Such fake lifestyles and vain attitudes are part of the anti-feminist models that Dorothy Parker was criticizing. She portrays the women as foolish. Annabel and Midge have a childlike quality; they act like two little girls playing

dress up and pretending to have a million dollars. Parker implies that these girls are not part of the Women's Movement, but that they are shallow, arrogant children.

It seemed that no woman was safe from the poison pen of Dorothy Parker. Over time she has become well-known for her condemnation of the flapper lifestyle.

### The Flapper

The playful flapper here we see,  
     The fairest of the fair.  
 She's not what Grandma used to be—  
     You might say, *au contraire*.

Her girlish ways may make a stir,  
     Her manners cause a scene,  
 But there is no more harm in her  
     Than in a submarine.

    She nightly knocks for many a goal  
     The usual dancing men.  
 Her speed is great, but her control  
     Is something else again.  
 All spotlights focus on her pranks.  
     All tongues her prowess herald.  
 For which she well may render thanks  
     To God and Scott Fitzgerald.

Her golden rule is plain enough—  
 Just get them young and treat them rough.

(1922)

Dorothy Parker begins her poem by saying that flappers are innocent and easygoing; they are not “what Grandma use to be”. This “slogan” was part of the draw for young women to participate in the flapper lifestyle. Women wanted to break from tradition: to drink, act and think what they wanted and to associate

with others who were the opposite of their predecessors. However, Parker's tone leads the reader to believe that she does not mean this as a compliment.

Sometimes, the ways in which people go about challenging the norm, are not always the best or more productive.

Parker refers to flappers as "girls", not as "women", which says a lot of her opinion of them. She thinks they are obnoxious and though they may seem harmless, they are more than capable of doing damage. Her explanation of flappers being as harmless as a submarine is an ironic way of saying that flappers are indeed destructive to themselves and to society.

Parker goes on to call flappers promiscuous and mischievous. They are more noticed for their unruly behavior, rather than for any good that they do. She says that they are accepted by society because of "God and Scott Fitzgerald". F. Scott Fitzgerald was one of the first authors credited with both mirroring and creating the flapper trend in the United States. He was quoted as saying that the perfect flapper was "lovely, expensive, and about nineteen." Parker says that Fitzgerald was in no small part responsible for the acceptance of flappers into society. Parker notes that flappers represent youth and states that the life they lead is a hazardous one.

After reading Dorothy Parker's opinions of women in the 1920s and 30s, it seems as though no woman could win in her eyes. Many women at the time had the same feelings towards other women. Women had to walk a fine line between being too passive and being too independent. Dorothy Parker was not afraid to criticize herself as a woman who wrote for women's magazines and influenced

other women in their behaviors. However, as an author, she brought the different kinds of women to the attention of the public.

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Dorothy Parker had the ability to use wit and humor in her works to address real social issues that affected the society in which she lived, as well as her personal life. The issues tackled by Parker are ones that were not only relevant to the 1920s and 30s, but they are still pertinent in modern society. The “glass ceiling” (the barrier preventing women from excelling in business) and tension in relationships between men and women still exist. Abortion is another issue that is still present. It is taboo, not only for propriety’s sake, but also for religious and political reasons as well. Finally, the controversy of relationships among women and the choice to be housewives or businesswomen is a prominent one, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dorothy Parker’s works not only spoke of an America that existed 90 years ago, but they speak to modern generations. Parker’s humorous writings are available for modern readers to relate to with regard to the relationships between men and women, abortion and the strain in the relationships among women.

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