

PLEASURE READING:  
*PLAYBOY'S LITERARY FICTION*

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

PLEASURE READING:  
*PLAYBOY'S LITERARY FICTION*

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A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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for Abby, who makes all things possible.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes short literary fiction published in *Playboy* magazine for the first two decades after its 1953 inception. Although Hugh Hefner's magazine was best known for its nude pictorials, its editorial mix also included journalistic features, politically progressive opinion writing and short stories from a staggering list of established fiction writers. This project confronts the central question of how literary fiction functioned in the context of *Playboy* culture and Hefner's agenda of consumerism, and this study reveals that these stories relied on an enduring emphasis on individualism to connect to emerging social impulses in the postwar period.

After an introduction of the magazine's history and the *Playboy* philosophy of consumerism, this project analyzes stories from Charles Beaumont and James Thurber as defining narratives for a new incarnation of the American Dream following WWII. The second section examines *Playboy's* efforts to reformulate marriage in part through stories from Philip Roth, Irwin Shaw and John Updike. Finally, this project calls on fiction by Joyce Carol Oates and Vladimir Nabokov as indications of how *Playboy's* commitment to self-interest helped the once-subversive publication to assume a relatively conservative posture.

## **Introduction: HUGH HEFNER AND “FIRST-RATE READING MATTER”**

On a 1956 episode of the short-lived *Night Beat*, a young Mike Wallace welcomed audiences to his news program by telling them the first story of the night was Hugh Hefner. The camera then cut to a shadowy image of Hefner grinning as if he had been caught in some mischief. “We’ll try to find out why he really did start *Playboy*,” Wallace told the audience, “and whether or not it’s just a smutty story.” Instead of a simple interview, the session became a clash of political and sexual ideologies as voiced by two developing icons of the American media. Wallace accused Hefner of being “lascivious” and endorsing a “sniggering” view of sex that dragged down *Playboy*’s publisher and audience alike. Hefner only shook his head, kept grinning and replied that he “considered strongly” that sex was a “healthy act.”

More than a half-century later, Hefner’s approach to sex has moved into the cultural mainstream, and Wallace’s conservative views seem as outdated as the black-and-white broadcast of *Night Beat*. But on that night, Hefner was eager to answer critics like Wallace that called *Playboy* “oversexed.” Hefner told him, among other things, that *Playboy* was more than smut. The magazine included, he said, “literature by distinguished authors.”

Literary fiction is perhaps the most overlooked ingredient in a magazine formula that earned money and fame for Hefner and left a bunny-eared imprint on the culture of postwar America. The list of *Playboy* writers includes Philip Roth, John Updike, John Cheever, Jack Kerouac and John Gardner. Women writers such as Joyce Carol Oates, Laurie Colwin, Bharati Mukherjee and Margaret Atwood published in the magazine, and

international writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges and Haruki Murakami wrote for Hefner's publication.

But Hefner never aimed to create a literary magazine; instead he wanted to create a publication dedicated to his vision of the good life—a lifestyle of consumerism and access to women—that could act like a guidebook for leading American men away from what Hefner labeled as Puritan morality. As Hefner biographer Steven Watts writes, *Playboy* valued “good food and drink, first rate reading matter, and a compliable young person of feminine gender” (76). Even before Marilyn Monroe's 1953 nude pictorial propelled Hefner's magazine toward cultural prominence, Hefner thought deeply about the role of literature in postwar life. Hefner's job at *Esquire* informed his opinion that “first rate reading matter” was a fundamental part of a magazine's formula for success, even if, as Watts writes, “the cultural curriculum taught at the *Playboy* schoolhouse aimed to provide a veneer of sophistication rather than the real thing” (80). Hefner's magazine sold so many copies because of its nude pictorials, but the editor was far less interested in seeing the bared skin than the realization of his consumerist philosophy. He imagined not only that the postwar American man should have a good book in one hand and a blonde in the other, but that this vision was one of unprecedented health and wellbeing. The magazine remained dedicated to publishing fiction, and with the considerable aid of its celebrated centerfolds, passed *Esquire* by selling 1.1 million copies a month by 1956 and grossing \$3.5 million.

In many ways, the success of *Playboy* in the 50s and 60s represented exciting possibilities and an expanded marketplace for the writers of the day. Although the magazine began by republishing work that had success in other venues, it soon formed a

reputation as a place for experimentation for short-story writers. According to former *Playboy* editor Alice K. Turner, “By the end of the second year, all the stories were new, and major writers like James Jones were already looking to a market that offered a kind of creative freedom largely absent from the ‘family’ magazines that predominated the 1950s” (IX). Although many of *Playboy’s* writers continued to publish in *The New Yorker*, Hefner’s magazine rescued pieces that were too (relatively) risqué for mainstream publication. The magazine won a number of awards for its publishing of fiction, including the 1985 National Magazine Award won in part for publishing a John Gardner story titled “Julius Caesar and the Werewolf.” Some *Playboy* stories were the writers’ cast-offs, but in more than 60 years of publishing fiction, the magazine scored its share of gems as well.

While *Playboy* built its reputation as a viable literary market, the conventions of the “playboy story” began to develop. Although Turner insisted “there is no ‘formula’ to *Playboy* fiction” (x), similar themes, conflicts and characters sketches united much of the early fiction. A 1956 Richard Matheson story titled “A Flourish of Strumpets” is perhaps the most emblematic of these early stories. In the story, a husband named Frank reacts with displays of self-righteousness when a door-to-door prostitution service begins in his neighborhood, but soon he finds himself inevitably seduced by the prostitutes. The women in the story are drawn in highly sexualized caricatures: “a perky brunette with a blouse front slashed to forever” (38), “a raven-haired, limp-lidded vamp” (38) and “a redhead sheathed in a green knit dress that hugged all that was voluminous and there was much of that” (39). Frank suggests the new exchange is a “cultural phenomenon” (41) and when the story ends with a male prostitute soliciting Frank’s wife, readers are

rewarded with exactly the twist that represents *Playboy's* philosophy of better living through pleasure. The story brought in positive mail from readers (Turner 33) largely because it introduced one of the magazine's hallmark political notions that women, too, could find sexual pleasure outside of marriage. The focus on sex and marital politics made "A Flourish of Strumpets" a trademark *Playboy* story. But later stories in the magazine would alter, challenge or abandon these conventions altogether.

After *Playboy* hired A.C. Spector as a way to bolster the magazine's reputation for literature, the editorial staff remained aware of the unique market they were creating. Watts writes that "editors joked confidently about their preeminence, with one wisecracking that his idea of the perfect Playboy would 'feature articles by West Coast models interlaced with the genitalia of famous writers'" (300). The centerfolds brought in an audience of "prisoners, truck drivers and professors," according to current *Playboy* fiction editor Amy Grace Lloyd, who has said *Playboy* attracts "people who just like a good story." After securing the rights to an unpublished Nabokov manuscript in 2009, Lloyd explained, "we can reach so many more people than anybody else, and we're also reaching people who don't read fiction generally, or at least literary fiction" (Lloyd interview).

But there's nothing new about Lloyd's recent contention that someone "interested in breasts" could also enjoy a well-crafted story. Rather, it's an echo of the 1950s version of the "good life" at the heart of Hefner's publishing project that included access to women, material goods and quality fiction. Sometimes, the fiction of *Playboy* offered direct commentary on the magazine's cultural position, as in Andre Dubus' "Anna" published in 1981. In the story, the title character suffers from a monotonous and lower-

class existence in a small town but reads *Playgirl* (a failed companion to *Playboy* Enterprise's flagship magazine) as an escape. She watches bank tellers and professional women pick up other magazines but imagines they also indulge in the fantasies of *Playgirl* as part of an upper class existence:

The tellers never picked up those magazines, but Anna was certain they had them at home. She imagined that, too: where they lived after work, before work. She gave them large pretty apartments with thick walls so they heard only themselves; stereos and color television, and soft carpets and soft furniture and large brass beds; sometimes she imagined them living with men who made a lot of money, and she saw a swimming pool, a Jacuzzi. (424)

Here, Anna's fetishization of these women includes a hint toward the women's sexuality by including *Playgirl* in their private lives. And the magazine is part of a package of material comfort—stereos, television, carpets and furniture—that eludes Anna, a store-clerk-turned-criminal, throughout the story. Even after a successful robbery attempt, Anna still lacks the “good life” and satisfaction she imagines for these women at the beginning of the story, which reinforces Hefner's philosophy that the good life isn't about financial security but rather the guiltless enjoyment of consumer society.

But how could *Playboy* pretend that the same patterns of guiltless consumption could apply to both its nude pictorials and its literary fiction? A nude Janet Pilgrim and a Norman Mailer short story make odd bedfellows; the magazine's combination of these elements challenged the barrier between high and low culture. In *A Novel Marketplace*, Evan Brier suggests that in the postwar period “there was a tension between the missions

of self-appointed protectors of high culture and those who wished to spread literacy, promoters of the value of reading for everyone” (7). Hefner might not have meant to “spread literacy” in any altruistic sense, but his consumerist philosophy called for consumption generally, and that included literature. *Playboy* thus found itself “occupying crucial but neglected intermediate space between the much discussed twin extremes of mass-culture corporations and highbrow critics” (Brier 6) by celebrating both the artistic merits of writers and the pleasures of sexuality.

This coupling of erotica and literature came into peculiar focus in the authorial career of Alice Denham. While writing her novel, Denham posed for *Playboy* to support herself, as Carrie Pitzulo describes in *Bachelors and Bunnies*: “In early 1956, Denham had an idea—she would pitch her story, ‘The Deal,’ to *Playboy* and offer herself as the accompanying Playmate of the Month. She says, ‘Hefner loved it’” (*Bachelors* 53). Denham’s feelings about posing for the magazine were ambivalent—she obviously prized her writing career over her work as a nude model—but after the story and centerfold were published in 1956, her novel drew attention from Doubleday, Random House, and Houghton Mifflin (Pitzulo, *Bachelors* 55). It’s no wonder that Hefner “loved” the idea of mixing fiction and photographs; he had been profiting from the formula for years. The story’s title, “The Deal,” then, is strangely emblematic of the capitalist exchange of sexuality under which *Playboy* fiction flourished.

*Playboy*’s publishing strategy was financially lucrative, but intensifying feminist critiques in the 60s and 70s questioned the social costs of the magazine’s success. The loudest anti-*Playboy* voices had abandoned arguments of morality for those decrying objectification and exploitation—accusations which Hefner felt less equipped and less

encouraged to answer than those of his Puritanical detractors. Hefner wanted to consider himself a political ally of women. As Watts points out, “On one hand, *Playboy* overturned traditional standards by promoting women’s freedom to enjoy sex and advocating economic opportunity, social equality, and abortion rights for them,” and Hefner’s political contributions and writings supported much of this. “On the other hand, radical gender feminists attacked *Playboy* for degrading women as sexual objects, portraying it as a bastion of male patriarchy and oppression” (451). Hefner was an activist and donor for a range of progressive causes, but the question remained whether he supported the freedom of women only for its potential for increasing the consumerist hedonism at the center of his project.

In *Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich explains the inclusion of fiction and other editorial elements in *Playboy* as factors in a movement toward freeing the postwar American man from the economic burdens of marriage. If what men truly craved was an escape from their wives, the magazine needed to bolster its masculine credibility with its centerfolds, Ehrenreich theorizes. “The real message was not eroticism, but escape—literal escape, from the bondage of bread-winning. For that, the breasts and bottoms were necessary not just to sell the magazine, but to protect it” (51). Marriage was a sign of masculine power but limited sexual possibilities; Hefner wished to introduce sexual prowess as the new standard of manhood. “The new male-centered ensemble of commodities presented in *Playboy* meant that a man could display his status or simply flaunt his earnings without possessing either a house or a wife,” writes Ehrenreich, “and this was, in its own small way, revolutionary possibility” (49). The political stance of *Playboy* would free women, but perhaps only in such a way that would ensure greater

sexual access for its male readers. The magazine represented the “possibility” of consumption (of sex, material goods and literature) as a substitute for more traditional markers of manhood.

Although Ehrenreich insists that the magazine believed “to stay free, a man had to stay single” (47), *Playboy* was often pro-marriage and against adultery in its editorial sections. Carrie Pitzulo, author of *Bachelors and Bunnies*, offers a more nuanced view of the magazine as encouraging individual and economic freedom within the boundaries of marriage as it instead “contributed to an ongoing romanticization of heterosexual monogamy by insisting upon mutual respect for and within relationships” that “acted as a bridge between the traditionalism of the previous era and the modern celebration of personal freedom and fulfillment” (7). Dozens of *Playboy* stories centered on escape from marriage, but others instigated questions about improving it. Much of the magazine’s fiction was not, in fact, opposed to all forms of marriage—only the ones that threatened the consumerist freedoms that Hefner held as sacred. Pitzulo writes that “Hefner offered his readers a new, inclusive heterosexual agenda—one that included sexual pleasure for both men and women. It was a credo that was embraced by the American mainstream” (179). And it was one that hinged on the notion that the sexual and consumerist satisfaction of the individual was a main determinant of a marriage’s value.

*Playboy* could, in fact, encourage men to marry as long as it didn’t interfere with the lifestyle of consumption that Hefner packaged for the postwar American male. The magazine was invested in the tandem creation and satisfaction of the desire for Hefner’s version of the “good life.” Hefner told the postwar man what he ought to want, and the

magazine's advertisement showed him how to get it. This strategy of building a consumer lifestyle and then profiting from its consumption is a hallmark of postwar culture and sustained *Playboy's* publication; as Donald M. Lowe writes in *The Body in Late Capitalist U.S.A.*: "It is now possible to create and sell distinctive nostalgic lifestyles themselves as desirable ways of life. Instead of targeting specific lifestyle groups as potential buyers for specific commodities, it is more profitable to create and stimulate the consumption of commodities associated with distinct lifestyle images" (66). Rather than trying to offer the postwar American male a reaffirmation of his father's values and stable marriage, *Playboy* instead published fiction that destabilized the need for marriage. *Playboy* stories constructed a new sense of possibility and the promise of individual satisfaction, and those possibilities came with a complement of new consumer products. Lowe suggests, "we no longer consume commodities to satisfy relatively stable and specific needs, but to reconstruct ourselves in terms of lifestyle associated with the consumption of certain commodities" (47). The postwar American male was instructed, by *Playboy*, to value casual sex and good literature—and without these valuable commodities, he might not be able to "reconstruct" his identity around the faux-sophistication of Hefner's "good life."

There remain important questions about whether Americans truly sought new lifestyles and whether *Playboy's* version represented a viable model. In her 2011 dissertation, "Cold War Playboys: Models of Masculinity in the Literature of *Playboy*," Taylor Joy Mitchell reads the magazine's construction of this lifestyle as a response to "Cold War paranoia, homophobia, conspicuous consumption and fears of feminization" (9). Mitchell perhaps doesn't go far enough in her suggestion that the magazine

contributed to a “crisis of masculinity” in the 1950s by offering different views of manhood; the truth is that *Playboy* redefined not only the masculine, but the identity of the individual (regardless of gender) in a consumerist culture. Mitchell suggests “that the literature *Playboy* includes has always been a necessary feature to creating its masculinity model” but errs slightly in claiming the fiction “often destabilizes the magazine’s grand narrative because it presents readers with alternative models of masculinity” (2). Rather, I would argue, the magazine’s true “grand narrative” was based not exclusively on men but on consumer identity, and its fiction offered a portrait of the American as primarily a self-interested consumer.

*Playboy* was so successful with consumers because it offered a product they felt they couldn’t get elsewhere—a sexual experience with a beautiful or famous woman, even if they knew that experience lacked the authenticity of an actual sexual encounter. Alan Soble, a noted sex theorist, writes of *Playboy*: “Men are lucky to be able to use their minimal economic power to catch a foggy glimpse of [Nicolette] Sheridan’s rear end, which is something they know while masturbating with *Playboy*—instead of using their sexual power to ‘get’ or ‘possess’ a real woman” (167). The postwar consumer culture offered men of modest economic means the chance to “get” *Playboy*’s centerfolds. And similarly, the magazine’s reader wasn’t required to spend time studying contemporary literature to find what Hefner believed to be the most fulfilling literary experience possible; Hefner would deliver the exact “first-rate reading matter” that he proposed would fit into the lifestyle. We can then read the stories published in *Playboy* as the medium by which the postwar male could obtain cultural sophistication—a version of sophistication that was fundamentally gratifying to his growing sense of self importance.

This project analyzes *Playboy* fiction in three parts, the first of which focuses on ways in which the magazine's fiction acted as the mythology of a new incarnation of the American dream based on consumerist identity. In the second I will trace how Hefner's vision required a reformulation of marriage, and how 60s writers like Philip Roth and John Updike reconciled the bonds of matrimony with the goals of the individual. In the paper's final section, I will show how stories by Joyce Carol Oates and Vladimir Nabokov sought the limits to consumer self-indulgence during the magazine's entrance into the cultural mainstream. *Playboy's* fiction represents a unique meeting place between postwar literary authors and the American public, and its stories trace the narrative of the individual's prominence in both the literature and popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Chapter One: *PLAYBOY* AND THE AMERICAN WET DREAM**

In some ways, Hugh Hefner's life has followed the pattern of one his fictional heroes, Jay Gatsby. Just as Gatsby returned from the war, so had Hefner. Both were troubled by unsatisfactory romantic lives, and both devoted themselves to climb the ladder of capitalist society. Like Gatsby, Hefner sought to reinvent himself through material opulence and swinging parties.

Hefner succeeded in his reinvention thanks to his keen sense that after WWII's culture of heroic sacrifice had begun to fade, a new social dictum would emerge for the American male. Thus a new standard of excellence—a new American Dream—was beginning for men like Hefner, and he embraced the philosophy of consumerist consumption at the heart of *Playboy*. As a devoted fan of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel (Watts 56), Hefner recognized that literature could play an active role in the redefinition

of the American Dream generally and in the postwar period specifically. Just as Pitzulo suggests, *Playboy's* content contributed to this dream-formulation “through its incessant emphasis on that quintessentially American pastime, consumer self-improvement” (6), and the magazine’s fiction emphasized that sense of individualism as a key to understanding the challenges of postwar society.

But the cultural shift from a war effort culture to consumerism was a complicated one, and *Playboy* straddled the line between self-interested and selfish, indulgent and decadent. The eroticism of the magazine distanced *Playboy* from every part of the political spectrum. The right bristled against its sexual aggressiveness; the left was angered by the exploitation of women and unapologetic class distinctions. In *Cultural Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, Irene Taviss Thomson suggests that “all sides disavow the exercise of merely selfish pleasures” (86) as the basis for an American Dream despite the fact that historical formulations of that dream all primarily benefit the individual rather than society as a whole. Hefner’s vision wasn’t exactly the suburban home and family car of the 1950s (he would prefer a downtown bachelor pad and a roadster), but it shared the same desire to own material goods and work toward financial prosperity. Thomson suggests that though *selfishness* was un-American, *individualism* could still be the basis for a new American Dream for *Playboy* readers.

Many of the magazine’s first readers were a decade past returning home from the world’s largest military conflict, and American men faced the challenge of transitioning from soldiers back to family men. *Playboy* offered a lifestyle of diversion. In this case, the pleasures of consumerism offered the individual American male a “flight from existential inwardness” (13) described by Lois Tyson in her book, *Psychological Politics*

*of the American Dream*. Tyson identifies an inherent problem with this Dream formulation—what she sees as “an ideological structure in which material and spiritual domains are yoked in a way that promotes unrealistic reliance on the former to the detriment of the latter” (5). If *Playboy’s* consumerism put American spiritual fulfillment in jeopardy, how then, could the magazine remain so attractive to its audience? The answer, partly, lies in the magazine’s fiction, which maintained a stalwart emphasis on the importance of individualism in its first decade of publishing. These fictions operated on a central premise that Americans could be self-interested in both their material and spiritual well-being.

The stories upon which I focus in this section show *Playboy’s* construction of the American Dream, which Tyson defines succinctly as a “dream of self” (5). These early stories mythologized the *Playboy* lifestyle as both one of material opulence and “spiritual” or psychological truth for the postwar male. Charles Beaumont’s “Black Country” confronts America’s burgeoning civil rights movement—a potential threat to the coherence of the dream myth—by offering an emphasis on the privilege of the white male identity. The second story, James Thurber’s “Brother Endicott,” is emblematic of a recurring strategy in *Playboy* fiction of exploring the dimensions of the American abroad in order to define the contours of national identity.

As Steven Watts writes, *Playboy’s* earliest stories placed Hefner’s hedonism in the context of postwar economic dominance: “Mixing two parts eroticism and one part intellect, and adding a dash of irreverent humor, [Hefner] cheerfully concocted a cultural cocktail that eased ambitious young men into a fuller enjoyment of American abundance in all of its material and emotional dimensions” (80). Hefner’s proposition to postwar

men was simple and enticing: American men had won the war, and they ought to enjoy the fruits of victory. *Playboy* invited them not only to enjoy the “cultural cocktail” of consumerism, but to be completely defined by it—to value life chiefly as an act of obtaining sex, material goods and, of course, literature.

“Black Country” appeared as the first original piece of *Playboy* fiction in its September 1954 issue. The story would eventually be regarded as a hallmark story in the career of Charles Beaumont. This story of a white jazz player finding his niche in a black band offered *Playboy* readers the same entertainment value and edginess promised by the magazine’s growing reputation while also implying a stake for the magazine in the changing racial landscape. *Playboy* maintained an interest in race relations throughout its history, publishing pictures of the first black Playmate, Jennifer Jackson, in 1965 and later making history with an interview between Alex Haley and a high-ranking white supremacist (Watts 196). The story’s overtones of racial conflict helped to separate *Playboy* from more mainstream magazines that would shy from publishing such a piece. The racial climate of the 1950s provided an ideal milieu for a horror writer like Beaumont to scrutinize contemporary issues; as one critic has observed, “Beaumont saw the tensions in racial inequality and the American civil rights movement as powerfully dislocating as any that supernatural horror had to offer” (Dziemianowics 34). By placing the story’s main character, the white Sonny, in a subculture dominated by black American traditions, Beaumont creates an image of the individualized white man with the potential for growing into a heroic character.

Sonny, who functions in “Black Country” as a wish-fulfilling version of Hefner’s playboy, initially earns entrance into Spooof Collins’ band by virtue of his persistence and

musical ability, a perpetuation of the meritocratic myth so crucial to the expansion of postwar consumer culture. But even in his virtuosity, Sonny is forced to abandon his racial identity, as revealed by the insights of the black drummer who narrates the tale: “He was white, but he didn’t play white, not these days; and he learned the hard way—by unlearning” (5). Beaumont subverts the potential for a direct confrontation of white and black with a move that privileges the individual even over the social forces that shape his identity in the first place. Sonny’s exceptional talent, just like the privilege touted by the playboy lifestyle, allows him the freedom of individualistic pursuits regardless of his social circumstances.

The conflict between Sonny and Spoof reaches a new pitch when they compete for the attention of Roseann, a singer who joins the band midway through the story. Roseann fits the *Playboy* formula in Beaumont’s sexualized descriptions of her as “a big bunch of curves and skin like a brand new penny” (10), but, like the magazine’s centerfolds, her role is part of a complicated system of ownership and individualism. In the context of *Playboy*’s pages—a context where sexuality is easily, if not essentially, commodified—Roseann readily serves as a piece of property that might help define the man that owns her. Beaumont’s narrator tells us: “The Lord says every man has got to love something, sometime somewhere. First choice is a chick, but there’s other choices” (10). Sonny is able to define his identity along the lines of his talent and race, but ownership of Roseann’s sexuality would remove her from the “public domain” status with which Beaumont brands her (13) and would symbolize the fulfillment he yearns for. Although Beaumont’s depiction of Roseann as a trophy—oversexualized, inert and without a distinct identity—is fundamentally problematic, it is also important to note her

status as an “owned” object as a basic factor in the history of racial identity in America. The quarrel between Sonny and Spoof comes to a head in Sonny’s direction to “keep your black hands off her” (12), a line that brings into focus the physical state of owning something (by handling it) and a history in which black flesh was eligible for ownership in America.

After Spoof falls ill and eventually dies, Sonny becomes the unquestioned leader of the band. The story reaches its climax when Sonny digs up the trumpet buried with Spoof and leads the band in a rendition of the dead man’s signature tune, “Black Country.” In this moment, Spoof is represented by a single material possession—the trumpet—which can be owned and manipulated by Sonny. Beaumont has established a tie between the object, artistic expression and identity in way that commodifies Spoof’s personality for a white man’s benefit.

Artistic style, the story seems to say, is something to be owned, bought and sold. We see this idea when one of Spoof’s solos transforms into a rough racial history and lays claim to ownership of its own style:

...now we’re swinging in the trees, now the white men are coming, now  
we’re in the boat and chains are hanging from our ankles and we’re  
rowing... now we’re sawing wood and picking cotton and serving up  
those cool cool drinks to the Colonel in his chair... now we’re free, and  
we’re struttin’ down Lenox Avenue and State & Madison and Pirate’s  
Alley, laughing, crying... and we want to go back and we don’t want to go  
back ... and we’re sitting in a cellar with a comb wrapped up in paper,  
with a skin-barrel and a tinklebox ... and we’re making something,

something, what is it? Is it jazz? Why yes, Lord, it's jazz ... something that is *ours*, something great that belongs to us and us alone, that we made, and *that's* why it's important. (11, italics in original)

When Beaumont's narrator imbues Spoof's trumpet performance with these vignettes of life for black Americans, he insists that this style is "*ours*, something great that belongs to us and us alone" in a mode that facilitates identity formation for black jazz musicians and audiences. But, just as importantly, it also commodifies this identity and style to be sold to audiences in a viable capitalist niche for black musicians.

But more interestingly, this same commodification of an individualized style is how "Black Country" attracted the attention of *Playboy's* editors and resonated with its contemporary audiences. As the magazine's Alice Turner writes: "'Black Country' could stand as a prototype for *Playboy's* ideal story of the 1950s with its jazz background, its jazz-inspired tempo, its hint of the supernatural, and its satisfyingly macabre ending" (1). Beaumont's style would sell well; and as *Playboy* was in its nascent stage in 1954, the publication's identity was fundamentally tied to what would sell. Consumption was at the heart of all things *Playboy*. The magazine reminded the postwar American male that his newfound income was best spent on a lifestyle that included good reading, and so buying into Beaumont's style was every bit as important in defining oneself in the consumer culture as buying a new stereo, a certain brand of whiskey or a car.

As the prominence of *Playboy* grew in the late 50s and early 60s, so did the fiction editors' purchasing power for the day's most popular writers. Nonetheless, it was still somewhat surprising for the magazine to land a piece from James Thurber, a writer tied so closely to *The New Yorker*, in its December 1962 issue. Turner suggests that

Thurber's widow turned the story titled "Brother Endicott" over to *Playboy* because of the editors' "affection for the gentle humorist" (87); the fact that Thurber's widow was aware of such an affection, or even the men's magazine itself, attests to the cultural ascension that Hefner's magazine had accomplished in its first decade.

Like dozens of other *Playboy* stories, Thurber's tale centers on an American character abroad—a literary trope that attempts to define American values by placing its central character in a foreign setting. The story's protagonist, Guy Farland, is working on a manuscript in a Paris hotel during the Fourth of July. Instead of Independence Day he celebrates "The Fourteenth of Deadline" (90), a distinction that reminds us of the ties between American identity and notions of hard work. Farland's experience in Paris is, in fact, completely obscured by the revelry of other Americans abroad, including the titular Edward Endicott, a man devoted to drinking whiskey and reliving old days with his fraternity brothers also on tour. Meanwhile, he ignores his young wife, Marie, and the woman reveals to Farland: "Edward can't stand any foreign country ... because it isn't God's country, and they don't use God's money, and you can't get God's martinis, or God's anything" (92). The parallel between the hard-partying Endicott—a man who emphasizes his sense of American exceptionalism—and Farland's more cavalier version of being abroad reveals Thurber's understanding that American identity was more aptly approached in terms of individualism than in claiming a part of the larger group's identity.

Brother Endicott can be read as a pathetic character and a foil for Farland, and though the uninitiated *Playboy* reader might expect an adulterous encounter between Farland and Marie, Thurber instead complicates the situation with the introduction of

Tom Gregg, an old flame of Marie's looking to rekindle their romance. The couple asks Farland to keep Brother Endicott occupied to give them moments of privacy, saying he is helping a "lady in distress" (95). This gesture of morality is typical of Thurber's characters. In *Thurber's Anatomy of Confusion*, Catherine McGehee Kenney points out that Thurber's characters are often placed at the center of "the war between men and women; the chaos of 'organized' society; the confusion in human systems, institutions and machines" (4). Farland's actions to help Marie abandon the oafish Brother Endicott represent such an attempt to find a course of morality amid the confusion of a social institution like marriage. Farland explains his actions in aiding Tom by suggesting he's restoring the balance of things away from the husband's favor--"The law is on his side, of course ... and the Church and all that sort of thing" (95)--in an explicit suggestion that his individual sense of morality stands opposed to the institutional constructs at the backbone of American culture.

Thurber treats the institution of marriage as an inherently unsatisfying social arrangement based on economic concerns—a notion shared by Hefner and many of his readers. After their reunion, Tom questions Marie's decision to marry Endicott when he tells her: "Nobody in her right mind would marry a man old enough to be her father, and live in Milwaukee" (95). But marriage suffers further institutional confusion in the story because Tom's solution is not a complete flight from marriage; he suggests that Marie marry him instead, and he frames his arguments along the same capitalist lines that underpin the initial problems with marriage, saying "We couldn't get married on nothing ... I happen to have a job now, a good job" (96). This treatment of marriage signals the complex transformation that the institution faced midcentury. Even though the idea of

romantic love was fundamentally attached to marriage, men and women still acknowledged that in many ways, it was chiefly about having money or at least “a good job.”

Although a man’s ability to marry still signaled economic strength, *Playboy’s* lifestyle replaced marriage as the standard of masculinity with an array of consumerist and sexual pleasures. Love was important for marriage, too—but only if the pleasures of matrimony could rise to the levels of Hefner’s lifestyle. In some ways, a wife was another thing that could be owned as part of a playboy’s collection. But the magazine also begged the question of whether settling with a wife could undercut a man’s consumerist potential. Marie struggles to be more than a piece of property passed between two men with the aid of a third. So even her gestures at an active role—like orchestrating an exit from her marriage—fail to rise to the level of her male counterparts. Her note of thanks left for Farland tells him he’s “the B-E-S-T Best,” the title of a song crooned regularly by her husband and his frat brothers, a detail that Farland finds disillusioning because Marie fails to separate her own experience from that of her husband (99). Thurber even imbues her with dissatisfaction with feminist progress:

“Mother belongs to the damn Lost Generation,” she said. “The trouble with the Lost Generation is it didn’t get lost enough. All the damn lost mothers had only one child,” she went on, warming to what was apparently a familiar thesis. “They all think their daughters are weak enough to do the things they thought they were strong enough to do. So we have to pay for what they did.” (94)

Marie's feminist discussion is backgrounded—and nearly overwhelmed—by the noise of her husband's fraternity singing, and Farland cuts her short when he notices the chorus has ceased. Marie's choice of the term "pay for what they did" again ties her marital dissatisfaction with capitalist terminology; if Thurber paints marriage as institutionally confused, it seems to be women who suffer most from the inequities and inefficiencies of the social construct.

Ehrenreich argues in *Hearts of Men* that Hefner's magazine was interested in the reformulation of marriage and feminism only in as much as it would serve the interests of masculine identity. *Playboy* worked "to prove that a playboy didn't have to be a husband to be a man" (51) and that the pursuit of consumer interests and sexual conquest could be made easier by trading married women for sexually available ones. Ehrenreich's take on the magazine's purpose helps us to understand the hierarchy of masculinity established in "Brother Endicott." Although Tom is a preferable alternative to Marie's husband, he still exhibits less masculine control—by virtue of his invocations of marital commitment-- than Farland, who remains at the top because of his pronounced self-interest.

Endicott is placed at the bottom of this masculine hierarchy through Thurber's treatment of the character's homoerotic and homosocial tendencies. The fraternity brothers exhibit a common disinterest in their wives, instead preferring physical contact through their symbolic secret "grip"—Thurber writes, "Farland was glad when he was finally given a glass to hold instead of a man's right hand." (97) The fraternity's celebration of masculinity is also organized along class lines, on display when Endicott warns Farland: "Don't ever try to give a cop the grip, Guy. They think you're queer. Sons of bitches never get through high school" (97). Here, we see Endicott attempting to mask

his homoerotic leanings by asserting his sense of class superiority, but neither Endicott's class nor his status as a married man spare him from being cast a lesser man than the heterosexually normative Farland.

Thurber's story relocates the masculine identity away from marriage and toward Farland's brand of self-interest. Where Endicott is chiefly characterized by his role as a fraternity brother, Farland instead finds his identity in his work as a writer. His identity is so tied to his profession that his writing style sways his entire worldview; when first meeting Marie, he thinks: "If I were a young writer I would say, 'She looked like a chic Luna moth in her light-green evening gown'" (90). Farland's preoccupation with himself as a writer not only speaks to his American work ethic but also represents the modernist belief in the compatibility of aesthetics and identity, even when that identity is in flux. His writing style anchors his sense of individualism and allows him to except himself from his peers. And despite the fact that the story's stakes are highest for the members of its central love triangle—Brother Endicott, Marie and Tom—Farland ends the story by looking in his bathroom mirror and saying, "Everything happens to you... What's the matter, don't you know how to duck anymore?" (99). Again, Thurber has privileged Farland's experience as an individual—even when his moral stance in helping Marie's escape has had imperfect consequences for the other characters. Even if, as Kenney points out, Thurber comes to an "inability to formulate final answers" (6) for his examinations of social confusion, he undoubtedly places the nexus of such a struggle at the level of the individual.

But it's important to notice that while Farland is self-interested, he isn't necessarily focused on soul-searching or inward examination. In fact, the mirror scene is

the most direct look that Thurber offers into Farland's psychology, and that's part of what makes him an ideal representative of the *Playboy* lifestyle. As Pitzulo writes, "Hefner's bachelor was a far cry from the 'inner-directed' traditional American man" and that the "midcentury consuming male was, depending on one's perspective, considered a predictable product of affluent times" (72). Thurber's story, and much of the early *Playboy* fiction, helped to construct a consumerist version of the American Dream that suited the postwar period's economic abundance. And the root of this version of the American Dream was not only its perpetuation of consumer-based identities but the fact that it appealed to the national psyche with its emphasis on individualism. As Thomson suggests, these versions of the American Dream promise individuals "freedom to make their own moral and lifestyle decisions" while simultaneously avoiding the appearance of "imposing its values or morals on the larger population" (79). Beaumont's "Black Country" sought not to solve the problem of race in 1950s America but rather to offer the individual an existence outside of the social conflict, just as Thurber's portrait of Guy Farland held up to an illusion that the postwar male would prosper through self-interest.

In this way, *Playboy* fiction comprised a complementary mythology for the consumerist version of the American Dream. These were stories constructed by individually distinct writers—as defined by their literary styles—that centered on the triumphs of individually directed characters for the benefit of self-interested readers. This emphasis on individuality represents a major contributing factor in what Watts identifies as "a powerful current pulling along many, perhaps most, modern American toward a common destination: self-fulfillment in every way imaginable in a world with few restraints" (454). The act of reading these stories gave *Playboy* readers another way of

assembling their consumption-era identities, substituting the imagined psychologies of fictional characters for any true inwardness.

## **Chapter Two: A FLIGHT TOWARD EQUALITY**

In an August 1961 short story titled “The Killer in the TV Set,” *Playboy* readers encountered Mr. Ordz, a man trying to avoid capture inside his television, where he’d be forced to emcee a variety show for perpetuity. But Mr. Ordz’s real fear isn’t the supernatural pull of the T.V.—it’s the wife upstairs that writer Bruce Jay Friedman describes as “a plump woman who had discovered sex in her early forties.” The woman’s sexuality is an unwanted obligation for her husband: “In curlers, she waited each night for Mr. Ordz to come unravel her mysteries so that she might, in her own words, ‘fly out of control and yield for the real me.’ Mr. Ordz had had several exposures to the real her and now scrupulously ducked opportunities for others” (79). The perfunctory sex that he eventually performs is an act of marital duty, and it’s exactly that sense of obligation that would have most struck fear into a playboy’s heart.

*Playboy* magazine undoubtedly opposed marital constraints in the editorial content of its first decade. Its first issue featured an article titled “Miss Gold Digger of 1953” that explicitly warned bachelors against the economic entrapment of marriage and, as Pitzulo writes, exclusively characterized wives as “conniving wenches” and “legal prostitutes” (*Bachelors* 23). Hefner’s magazine often encouraged married men to believe they would be happier if they were single. As Ehrenreich opines in *Hearts of Men*, the end of marriage would facilitate a brighter, freer life in which men would have more money to spend on a lifestyle of consumption. She writes: “*Playboy* had much more to

offer the ‘enslaved’ sex than rhetoric: It also proposed an alternative way of life that became ever more concrete and vivid as the years went on. At first there were only the Playmates in the centerfold to suggest what awaited the liberated male, but a wealth of other consumer items soon followed” (49). That is to say, if Friedman’s Mr. Ordz was unmarried, he would be free of the unsatisfying sex with his wife and instead would be driving fast cars and buying designer suits.

Because romance and seduction were important parts of the magazine’s approach, *Playboy* freely criticized the lifestyle of marriage without necessarily denying the emotional basis of committed relationships. In Ray Bradbury’s *Playboy* story, “The Vacation,” a family has wished for everyone else to disappear so that they can escape the monotony of their suburban lives. When the wish comes true, “they had taken it with remarkable calm at first, perhaps because they had not liked the city for so many years and had had so many friends who were not truly friends, and had lived a boxed and separate life of their own within a mechanical hive” (439). The family is left roaming the countryside and following railroads, and when they begin to feel lonely, their initial optimism crumbles. Although the father finds value in the insistence that he will “never come back to the silly damn dull routines” (439), his new life—which he shares exclusively with wife and son—fails to make him happy. The short piece ends with the family abandoning a picturesque picnic lunch and returning to the road desperate for interaction with someone outside their family. The moralistic message of Bradbury’s careful-what-you-wish-for story suggests American men could wish away the realities of the 1950s rat race, but they couldn’t realistically expect to find total fulfillment with the nuclear family, either. Marriage was not the answer.

But it's too easy to blame the movement against marriage as a male impulse and subsequently view *Playboy* as a simple piece of misogynist propaganda. Marriage restricted women as well. As Pitzulo writes in her answer to Ehrenreich: "A cynic might say that progressive gender politics merely served the needs of the randy playboy, for liberated womanhood would mean greater sexual satisfaction for men... In fact, these issues were consequences of the broader sexual revolution and the women's movement" ("Battle" 261). Figuratively speaking, why wouldn't Mrs. Ordz seek benefits of unmarried life the same way her husband would? The decade saw an upswing in women's enrollment in colleges, expanding use of birth control and the beginnings of new career opportunities for women. Perhaps Mrs. Ordz could have explored a new sexual climate to find a more satisfying partner than her unwilling husband.

After all, part of second wave feminism entailed female gratification—sexual and otherwise. Women wanted for themselves the jobs, cars and consumer goods granted to their male counterparts; coincidentally, they sought their own access to the consumerist pleasures and lifestyle established and sold by *Playboy*. Thus women also had a stake in redefining the institution of marriage. As Watts points out, the feminist movement had its own "agenda of self-gratification," and "*Playboy* and the feminist movement worked in tandem to undermine the domestic, suburban 'family togetherness' model of 1950s America" (246). It wasn't only the American man who wanted to flee the commitment of marriage; it was the American consumer. As *Playboy* and its readers grew older in the 60s, the magazine mostly dropped its anti-marriage rhetoric for a more nuanced approach—one that preached loyalty and consistency for any marriage that didn't infringe on individual freedoms.

Meanwhile, the 60s also saw *Playboy* drawing more and more of the era's most celebrated fiction, and writers were eager to contribute their voices to the magazine's forum on sexual and marital relations. Marriage, domesticity and infidelity became as much a part of *Playboy* fiction as the celebration of bachelorhood had been. With divorce becoming an increasing part of the readership's lives, Hefner's magazine continued to tout individualism and consumer enjoyment as a man's most reliable motivations for choosing between the single life and matrimony. In this section of my study, I will focus on works by Philip Roth and John Updike—writers emblematic of the decade's dissatisfaction with traditional social arrangements—and Irwin Shaw, whose war novel, *The Young Lions*, made him a prominent voice on morality. These writers were concerned not only with the economic and sexual ramifications of a man's choice to stay married, but also asked whether wedding was ever the *right* thing to do for either gender.

For the characters in Philip Roth's "An Actor's Life for Me," an already strained marriage is further tested by the couple's decision to delay child-rearing, a growing possibility for couples when the story appeared in *Playboy* in 1964. Walter Appel is a struggling playwright and his wife, Juliet, is an unsuccessful actress. Roth paints the New York couple as fundamentally codependent, and grants an insight into Walter's psyche that suggests he believes a child would sustain that dependency: "Juliet, between enthusiasm, leaning upon Walter, and Walter there to be leaned upon. During the day there were even moments when Walter thought that perhaps they should have a baby so as to prevent the marriage from falling apart, if that was what was beginning to happen" (124). As they struggle to find meaning in their marriage without children, they turn to their careers as possible sources of identity.

While at home, Walter is anxious about a male neighbor who walks around naked in view of Juliet's window; he fears that she is using her time in the study to spy on the naked man rather than, as she says, starting her writing career. Walter's suspicion about her writing, though, is deep-seated in his biased conception of womanly work. He regards her desire to write as "adolescent" (123) despite relying on his own writing career to define his manhood: "It was only a short while before he found himself feeling much more like a man, doing a regular day's work, and doing it well" (123). At first brush, the Appels seem like poster children for 1960s marital dysfunction—a wife disinterested in childrearing and a husband overinvested his white-collar work. But Walter isn't as successful a writer as he wishes to be; Roth endows Walter with a sort of malaise that is further troubled by the fact that his wife seems to suffer from the same lack of direction.

Roth's work resists a simple misogynistic reading that would amount only to wife-blaming because Walter's passivity mirrors his wife's. In her book, *Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties*, Mary Allen offers a feminist critique on the lack of agency for female characters in the works of Roth, Updike and other celebrated writers of the decade. But Allen cautions against classifying dissatisfaction as a characteristic of only one gender in fiction of the period. "In considering female characters it is a temptation to say ah-ha, look at the vapid female who suffers such-and-such a malaise, before realizing that her male counterpart is afflicted with much the same thing," Allen writes. "Failure is common to all" (7). And because Roth gives us two characters who seem equally dissatisfied with their circumstances, we can read their marriage as a "common failure" in which the reader

cheers for individuality—not simply male individuality—to triumph over an imperfect social arrangement.

Both of the Appels fit the mold of the “victim-hero” that Roth scholar John McDaniel uses to distinguish characters who seek alternatives to the social world that oppresses them. In this case, the Appels hope to cease “the diminishing of passion that must one day come to every last husband and wife” (Roth 127) by allowing one another a weekend affair. As McDaniel’s writing about the victim-hero suggests, the Appels are more interested in what will happen *to* them in this weekend than in what they will do. McDaniel writes, “in Roth’s view personal freedom and identity are revealed to the hero through the actions he takes in the social world—and through the actions the social world performs on the hero” (91). Although the couple seems to understand an adulterous weekend would alter their identities—and perhaps alter their individual freedom—they are unsure of how these new discoveries could change the social contract of their marriage. Before the couple parts, Juliet tells her husband: “I don’t care who you sleep with. Just don’t tell me about it when we meet again” (125), and Walter admires her courage and tells her to do the same.

The couple’s (or Roth’s) idea of extramarital sex as a way to improve a marriage harmonized with *Playboy’s* emphasis on hedonism. If both members of a marriage could find happiness in affairs, according to this attitude, then adultery was not only permissible but advisable. Walter takes a train to a vacation lodge in upstate New York and seduces a secretary there; Roth presents the event in simple and unromantic terms: “Never before had he committed adultery, yet he went off with the woman without much of an interior struggle. Juliet had said it was OK, and he had to find something out” (126).

Walter's need to understand more about his own nature distinguishes him as a character who lacks the qualities of self-actualization laid out by A.H. Maslow in his seminal 1950 study on the subject. Maslow's work informed a variety of pop psychology efforts in the decades following his study and provided another formulation of what the "good life" meant in the 60s. Self-actualized people--a group that the psychologist intriguingly calls "more completely 'individual' than any group that has ever been described and yet also more completely socialized" (200)--are defined by Maslow as motivated by "character-growth, character-expression, maturation and development" (186) and as having "relative independence of the physical and social environment" (188). Walter's dissatisfaction with his own character excludes him from Maslow's classification of self-actualization; the self-actualized "enjoy their sexual lives without unnecessary inhibition" (183) in contrast to Walter's constant doubts.

Walter's affair doesn't represent any wish-fulfillment for the character or even for the *Playboy* reader. Roth's prose shies away from any explicit description of the act, instead imbuing it with Walter's clinical approach and continuing disillusionment: "Where Juliet was long in the thigh, the secretary from Oneonta was short; where Juliet was brunette, she was light. Did these inconsequentialities make the difference? ... No, she was just somebody different, a perfect stranger, though he attended to her breasts as though she were a dear friend. And the truth was he couldn't stand her" (126). The sexual act is unfulfilling for Walter because what he'd lacked in his marriage wasn't sexual pleasure, per se, but rather a sexual experience shared with an actualized individual. Maslow even points out that in his self-actualized study subjects, "the sexual pleasures and particularly the orgasm provided not passing pleasure alone, but some kind of basic

strengthening” (190). But Walter returns from his trip without this “strengthening” or any answers. Instead, he totes a white ski sweater purchased for Juliet, an example of the wrong kind of purchase that he seems to be perpetually making. Hefner might direct him to the pages of *Playboy* to purchase a more satisfying lifestyle.

Juliet, on the other hand, returns to the marriage with a new job as an assistant for a theatre producer. Walter is initially overjoyed at this revelation, but mostly because of his relief that she hasn’t taken another lover. He seems unaware that Juliet’s move toward independence and self-actualization through work threatens the codependency that has defined their marriage. He understands her job as an attempt to “fill the gap” (128) but still maintains that “he should have forced her to have a child years ago” (133). Where Juliet takes steps toward individual fulfillment, Walter instead clings to romantic notions about his marriage. After his first act of adultery and the subsequent reunion, the pair attempts to make love and rekindle their lost passion:

Walter looked unflinchingly into Juliet’s eyes, and she into his, and they performed the act of love. The noise of the truck grew so loud that at one point Walter wanted to get up and pull down the window. But he stayed where he was and did what had to be done—which turned out to be more than having intercourse once again with his mate. They were telling each other that they wanted each other. When it was over and both lay panting in the strong light, Walter was willing to believe that their crisis was behind them, and that they were about to enter a new state of marriage.

(127)

Again, Roth has resisted any erotic descriptions for a *Playboy* reader seeking a scene of explicit sex, instead focusing on the truck outside. The sex then becomes “what had to be done” in service of Walter’s greater goal of maintaining his marriage, and here we see that this piece of *Playboy* fiction was about more than sex. Rather, Roth’s story highlights a psychological struggle in the magazine’s pages. What Walter lacks—and Hefner purports to provide—is a complicated notion of individual fulfillment dependent only partly on an active sex life.

But because Walter is incapable even of understanding his own shortcomings, he once again pursues sex as an answer when his marriage returns to its unsatisfying patterns. Visiting London and acting this time without the permission of his wife, Walter begins a scintillating affair with a vivacious actress named Tarsila Brown. “For the first time in his life, a woman dug her nails into his back,” Roth writes. “She moaned; she trembled; she cried out, ‘Oh, don’t, don’t!’ ... ‘Walter,’ she whispered, ‘you’re like I am. You’re crazy for it, too’” (129). Walter’s attraction to Brown flourishes because she is willing to tell him who he is—“like I am... crazy for it, too”—when his marriage has failed to give him a fulfilling sense of self. Tarsila Brown awakens Walter’s sexuality, including “jumping the gun” in the taxi before the couple reaches their doorway (129), because she is an independent and fully realized individual—not only Walter’s equal but perhaps his superior. But the relationship turns sour when she stakes him with an unflattering identity that he can’t accept; she tells him he’s “solid,” and Walter realizes she’s been using him to enact her own fantasies (130). Rather than appreciating Tarsila’s ability to enjoy sex, he fears it will overwhelm his own quest for identity, and so he abandons this relationship for reasons similar to those that threaten his marriage.

In fact, the fear of his own inefficacy throws Walter's marriage into crisis. As Juliet continues to work and gain the agency that her husband lacks, Walter returns to his suspicions about the naked neighbor and begins to blame himself for the seduction he imagines between Juliet and the naked man. "[Walter] had let her!" Roth writes. "She was right now—in spite, in anger, in bewilderment—taking off her clothes, moving to the window. *And he was letting her*" (136). His anguish over "letting her" shows that Walter has abandoned any notion of equality in his marriage for a model of ownership over Juliet's sexuality. He regrets that he hadn't already laid claim to Julie by forcing her to have children. It's this idea of marriage that *Playboy* worked most earnestly against, and so it's no surprise that Walter next attempts to disrobe to grasp the sense of individuality he has attributed to the nude:

In a dizzying moment—as though all the uncertainties of the preceding weeks had come upon him in a single blow—he spun toward the window and, leaning upon the sill, presented himself there, in his socks and his watch. Down in the courtyard below, as evidence that he was actually doing it, he confronted his own elongated shadow. *Yes, I can do anything. Who are you to be so smug? You're not even a person! I am a person! I am at my window—Juliet is at hers—he is at his—* (137)

Of course we understand Walter's claim to personhood here as ironic; he is bent on confronting not his own body but instead his shadow. His claim to be able to "do anything" is painfully erroneous, and his attempts at sexual expression fail—just as they eventually fell short with Tarsila Brown in London--because he is unsure of the identity behind the sex.

This moment of nudity haunts Walter when he and Juliet run into the naked man at the market days later. Walter grows so nervous about an encounter that he insists on a romantic getaway to the Bahamas to create distance between his wife and the neighbor. Walter's anxiety forces his marriage back into the dysfunction set out at the beginning of Roth's story. He implores Juliet to quit her job and her attempts to write, instead pigeonholing her into a role of domesticity and motherhood. Roth ends his story with his most sterile description of the couple's sex: "To assert once again what he was, what his wife was—at any rate, what they must be—he mounted Juliet, who had appeared all day to be so chastened, and while she held her breath, he proceeded to reproduce himself" (141). If the reader is left feeling unsatisfied by this concluding sex, it's because "An Actor's Life" is perhaps best read as a sort of *Playboy* cautionary tale. Walter Appel is no playboy; his anxiety bars him from acting on Hefner's almost sacred imperative of hedonistic enjoyment of women. The constant requirements of marriage, ostensibly, keep Walter from focusing on himself; and both Roth and *Playboy* depict marriage as an imperfect construction and as a danger to individual fulfillment.

It is too simple, though, to read *Playboy* fiction as placing marriage completely at odds with the individual. Rather, the magazine wanted to redefine marriage as a union of two individuals free to enjoy consumer society while they remained committed to one another. As Pitzulo explains it: "*Playboy* did not necessarily condemn multiple sexual partners, or even sex outside of marriage. But the magazines stood by the notion that the priority for any spouse was not instant gratification; it was sexual and emotional responsibility" (120). The Appels' marriage fails not only because they struggle to define the terms of their social contract but also because Walter lacks the sense of individuality

that such an agreement requires in the first place. In Maslow's terms, an ideal marriage would involve two self-actualized people because these types of people "have deeper and more profound interpersonal relations than any other adults" and "are capable of more fusion, great love, more perfect identification" (194). With this new way of looking at matrimony, the pro-individualism messages that critics saw as *Playboy's* attempts to dissolve marriage can be better understood as reformulations of marriage for the postwar consumer world.

Although the magazine's politics entailed real consequences for both sexes, Hefner and his editors still concentrated most of their attention on men and questions of manhood. If marriage were reformed into a more equitable institution, and if women continued to make advances, where would men find new guidelines for moral behavior? The magazines didn't believe in old-fashioned standards about "good girls" being the chaste ones, and so it was fair to ask, too, what would constitute a good man under the *Playboy* philosophy. Because the magazine's fiction emphasized individualism as a key to both happiness and morality, the good man was usually one who protected his self-interest in the face of society's demands. In 1967, *Playboy* published Irwin Shaw's story titled "Where All Things Wise and Fair Descend" that focused on one playboy's struggle to balance a life of privilege with his moralistic urge to aid another college student grieving over a brother's death. As biographer James Giles writes, Shaw was known for his vision "of a steadily increasing difficulty in the struggle to maintain personal integrity as the world becomes more chaotic—but of the absolute moral necessity of making such a struggle" (10). And in this story, Shaw gives *Playboy* readers the chance to reconcile a life of consumerist pleasure with the merits of an ongoing moral struggle.

Steve Denicott, the 20-year-old protagonist of Shaw's story, embodies Hefner's vision of a collegiate *Playboy* reader. Denicott is prolific in his work, enjoys the culture available to him and doesn't shy from female attention: "He got A's in English and history and had memorized most of Shakespeare's sonnets and read Roethke and Eliot and Ginsberg. He had tried marijuana. He was invited to all the parties. When he went home, mothers made obvious efforts to throw their daughters at him" (177). And though women are available to Denicott, he is selective in his sexual and social relations—a manifestation of, or at least a signifier for, his adherence to a sense of personal integrity. His attention focuses on one coed named Adele, who he has seduced with the help of Byronic poetry. But even his relationship with Adele is marked by the borders of his hesitance to show any vulnerability or risk his individuality: "He was having an affair with one of the prettiest girls on the campus and she said she loved him. From time to time he loved her. When he said it he meant it. At the moment, anyway" (178). Denicott's version of true but momentary love is significant because it empowers him while simultaneously allowing him to resist the sort of onerous commitment of which *Playboy* was so wary.

The first part of "Where All Things Wise and Fair Descend" unfolds almost so predictably that it seems out of place with the tradition of more complex *Playboy* fiction. Denicott is characterized as carefree and in control of the world that surrounds him, and Adele is treated as a mere symbol of his prowess rather than a rounded character that might challenge Denicott's privilege. Shaw writes: "Adele was a tall girl, her dark, combed head coming well above his shoulder. She had a triangular, blooming, still-childish face. Her walk, even with the books she was carrying in her arms, wasn't

childish, though, and he was amused at the envious looks directed at him by some of the other students as Adele paced at his side down the gravel path” (178). This playboy image begins to fracture, though, when Denicott visits an English class where another collegian named Crane recites a poem in the memory of his brother killed in a car crash. Denicott takes pity on Crane and accompanies him on a day trip to the site of the brother’s crash. On the road, Crane reveals his bitterness over a culture that he believes falls short of his brother’s idealized life. He seems almost obsessed with criticizing higher education and coeds’ sexual promiscuity; although Denicott is initially intrigued by Crane’s cynicism, their growing affection is threatened when Crane questions Denicott’s sexual relationship with Adele:

“Do you screw that girl I always see you with on campus?”

Steve put down his fork. “Now, wait a minute,” he said.

“I don’t like the way she walks,” Crane said. “She walks like a coquette. I prefer whores.”

“Let’s leave it at that,” Steve said. (184)

Crane’s claim that he “prefers whores” is not only part of his antisocial rhetoric but also a representation of his dissatisfaction with the growing complexity of gender relations in the 1960s. Crane lacks Denicott’s sexual appeal and has little proficiency in navigating courtship; he suggests instead stripping away the social façade of what he sees as a capitalist sexual exchange.

Crane is gradually revealed as an outcast, the opposite of his football-playing brother who has become an object of his worship. Men like Crane’s brother are the reason that the younger brother is a pariah, but he fails to grasp this reality. Instead, he

imagines a time in which the brother's football heroics distinguished his individual identity in the same way as Crane's antisocial diatribes. As Giles writes, "the irony is softened here by an underlying nostalgia and sadness personified by Crane" (43-44) because the younger brother yearns for an era of heroism that wasn't real in the first place. But Giles misreads the story slightly in his assertion that Crane admires his brother's being "devoted to a code of total honesty" (43) and that Shaw meant to critique a "spiritually hollow affluent America" (44) represented by Denicott. Rather, I would argue, Shaw impugns Crane's nostalgia as an unproductive standard for evaluating moral guidelines in postwar culture. We must read Shaw's treatment of Crane's nostalgia as ironic because his brother's standards are ultimately implausible, as illustrated by his brother's brutal idealism in romantic affairs:

"As for girls," Crane said. "The homeland of compromise, the womb of the second best—" Crane shook his head emphatically. "Not for my brother. Do you know what he did with his first girl? And he thought he was in love with her, too, at the time, but it still didn't make any difference. They only made love in the dark. The girl insisted. That's the way some girls are, you know, darkness excuses all. Well, my brother was crazy about her, and he didn't mind the darkness if it pleased her. But one night he saw her sitting up in bed and the curtains on the window moved in the wind and her silhouette was outlined against the moonlight, and he saw that when she sat like that she had a fat, loose belly. The silhouette, my brother said, was slack and self-indulgent. Of course, when she was lying down it sank in, and when she was dressed she wore a girdle that

would've tucked in a beer barrel. And when he saw her silhouette against the curtain, he said to himself, This is the last time, this is not for me.

Because it wasn't perfect, and he wouldn't settle for less." (186)

When Crane relates this story, Denicott scoffs at the extreme disrespect with which the dead brother approaches women. Because Denicott is so strikingly similar to Hefner's notion of a playboy persona, his reaction in this scene challenges feminist critiques that *Playboy* was completely devoted to the unrealistic standards of beauty displayed in its centerfolds. In this case, the magazine's fiction seems to acknowledge that pin-ups must be viewed with a separate standard than men use in real-life relationships. Denicott's reaction to Crane's misogyny is a primarily moral one, as "he couldn't help feeling sorry for the unknown girl, deserted, without knowing it, in the dark room, by the implacable athlete who had just made love to her" and suggests "Crane had loved his brother for all the wrong reasons" (186). Ostensibly, the dead brother claimed "this is not for me" because he was hesitant to commit to a real and imperfect relationship with a real and imperfect woman. Here, I would argue that we must recognize Shaw's sense of irony. The brother upholds his individual standards, but because these standards are so deeply flawed, his version of morality is suspect no matter how vigorously he adheres to his personal code.

Crane feels both inferior to his brother's faux-integrity and attached to its unrealistic standards for beauty as part of sexual relations: "What sort of woman would choose me?" Crane said harshly. 'I look like something left over after a New Year's party on skid row. And I would only take the best, the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most loving. I'm not going to settle for some poor, drab Saturday-night castaway'" (188).

Crane acts as an obvious foil for Denicott's carefree and self-satisfied demeanor, but Shaw implies that the latter boy's experience, however glamorous, lacks the complexity of Crane's grief. He writes: "Crane had the capacity for sorrow and now, after the day Steve had spent with the bereaved boy, he understood the capacity for sorrow was also the capacity for living" (189).

Rather than accepting Giles' reading that Shaw means to scrutinize Denicott's spiritual emptiness, I'd argue that the story calls for a direct confrontation with an imperfect world. Because despite Denicott's romance with Crane's idealism, his sympathy has run short by the time the pair returns to campus, and the story reaches its climax when Denicott must reevaluate his own life by Crane's standards: "Seeing Adele suddenly with Crane's eyes, he made a move to turn away. He didn't want to talk to her. He had to think about her. He had to think about everything" (189). In this moment of the story's thematic climax, Shaw recalls the dead brother's discourse on beauty as a catalyst to Denicott's growth as he "remembered the twinge of pity he had felt when he had heart about the fat girl erased from her lover's life by the movement of a curtain on a moonlit night. He turned and smiled in greeting as Adele came up to him. Crane had taught him a good deal that afternoon, but perhaps not the things Crane had thought he was teaching" (189). Thus "All Things Fair and Wise Descend" becomes a sort of coming-of-age-tale for Denicott reaching self-actualization.

As Giles asserts, "Symbolically, Crane's brother could never attain the sad, but essential, wisdom that Steve Denicott is developing at the end of the story; thus he, had to die or remain a perpetual adolescent" (44). And although the story ends with Shaw's fatalistic jab that Denicott "wasn't going to wake up, automatically feeling good, ever

again” (189), that automatic good feeling is replaced by the promise of self-actualization. Even if the portrait of Adele lacks the individuation of Denicott’s, Shaw’s story nonetheless hints at the idea that successful romance entails a conscious reconciliation with personal flaws. His story represents *Playboy*’s complicated approach to postwar matrimony in which the ideals of bachelorhood were no longer useful; only a confrontation with the imperfections of marriage could allow two individuals to flourish together.

Many of *Playboy*’s stories, like Shaw’s, centered on the bachelor experience, and the magazine was also well-stocked with stories about the plight of the married man. But what did *Playboy* fiction offer readers encountering the era’s growing divorce trend? As the consumerist possibilities of postwar America grew, and, as Ehrenreich argues, a married man might seek divorce as an escape from marriage. But even indulging in that consumerism entailed serious existential questions, and few writers capitalized on these dissatisfactions as prolifically as John Updike. He regularly published in *Playboy*, and his 1974 story “Gesturing” was part of a series of stories about a married couple named Richard and Joan Maple that was published across several years and in multiple magazines.

In “Gesturing,” the couple is attempting to establish new ground rules for their dissolving marriage, and the story begins with the promise of separation or divorce as renewed freedom for Richard Maple. After Joan tells him that she’s kicking him out of their suburban home, Richard experiences relief: “Abruptly full, his heart thumped; it was what he wanted. ‘O.K.,’ he said carefully. ‘If you think you can manage’” (799). With the assurance that Joan can “manage” on her own, Richard seems free from the economic

constraints of marriage—which Ehrenreich, of course, had suggested as the end game for *Playboy*. Free of his wife, Richard renews his sense of access to women as soon as he finds a new apartment: “He found the apartment in Boston on the second day of hunting. The real-estate agent had red hair, a round bottom, and a mask of makeup worn as if to conceal her youth” (801). Updike’s sexualization of the real-estate agent signals Richard’s hope that sex might represent an uncomplicated escape from the complications of his marriage.

Updike’s stories about the Maples and their marriage began in “Snowing in Greenwich Village” in a 1956 issue of *The New Yorker*. After establishing a new life in a New York apartment, the couple struggles to stay happy in 1963’s “Giving Blood.” Joan Maple turns to politics as an avenue for fulfillment in “Marching Through Boston” in 1965, and the couple’s relationship has irreparably fractured in a 1966 story titled “Your Lover Just Called.” Some critics have identified these stories as indicative of Updike’s larger narrative projects chronicling midcentury culture. In *John Updike: The Role of Women in his Short Fiction*, Cindy Rosen reads the saga of the Maples as an allegory for the state of American marriage and domesticity during a period in which she says Updike himself received one of his state’s first no-fault divorce settlements. “The decline of the Maples’ marriage marks a decline in America’s domestic agenda,” Rosen writes. “Their marriage originates in the 1950s amidst the propaganda of the ‘American dream’ as full of hope, they move from the city to the suburbs. The Maples’ lives proceed in tandem with America” (49-50). Rosen would like to frame Joan Maple as an “agent of history” (iv) in the complicated fluctuations of American domesticity, acting as a stand-in for both the oppression of women through marriage and their eventual freedom outside of it. She

identifies 1974's "Gesturing" as a turning point for the Maples and for the independence of women within the country because Joan Maple has begun to seek individualization outside of her marriage. In the story Updike calls America a "nation of temporary arrangements" (807), and it's through these new possibilities of domestic arrangements that it becomes possible to sell lifestyles and notions of individualism the way *Playboy* intended.

"Gesturing" is an intriguing *Playboy* story partly because its writer has long faced critical charges similar to those leveled at the magazine. Just as Hefner was accused of reducing women to pictures of breasts and thighs, Updike has been widely scrutinized for his female characters lacking agency and depth. For example, Elizabeth Tallent's book on Updike, *Married Men and Magic Tricks*, suggests that Joan Maple is expected to maintain her love and support even while Richard seeks new erotic possibilities. As Tallent writes: "If the love of certain women is predetermined, the consequences of that love are not, or the life of an Updike hero would be far easier. A hero must recognize the unknowns—the x of erotic risk, the y of domestic calm—and comprehend the equation by which they are covertly, inevitably, linked" (8). In "Gesturing" this link manifests in Richard's desire for both his wife and his mistress, Ruth. Updike frames this dichotomy in terms of Richard reestablishing the standards of domesticity after his separation: "When a women left, he would promptly set about restoring his bachelor order, emptying the ashtrays which, if the visitor had been Ruth, brimmed with long pale bodies prematurely extinguished and, if Joan, with butts so short as to be scarcely more than filters" (802). Updike seems to suggest there is something more fundamental about a "bachelor order" than either woman's standard. He writes: "Neither women, it somehow

pleased him to observe, ever made more than a gesture toward cleaning up” (802) in a nod to the story’s title and the story’s overarching distrust of marriage as an institution.

But not all critics indict Updike’s work as wholly misogynistic. In an essay titled “Updike, women and mythologized sexuality,” Kathleen Verduin reads “Gesturing” as part of an “intentionally ironic self-critique” (70) in the latter portion of Updike’s career in which he reevaluates his earlier stance on gender roles. Although he calls on problematic female archetypes, he does so in an examination of how those archetypes might operate in relation to his own experience. “Updike’s women do indeed evoke gender patterns archaically entrenched in Western culture,” Verduin concedes. “But if the author projects a mythology of women, that mythology turns first on a myth of self, and both run like a double helix through his work” (61). That is to say, Updike’s tendency toward emphasizing the otherness of his female characters is a direct product of his search for questions about the nature of self; the conciliatory female characters in “Gesturing” emphasize Richard Maple’s inability to see beyond the promise of erotic pleasures and into a deeper truth about these women. Richard Maple treats emotional intimacy as an afterthought to the promise of sexual pleasure; Updike thrusts him into adulterous situations despite knowing these arrangements are “doomed to disappoint; yet the proliferous adulteries of his fiction testify also to the incontrovertible excitement of the illicit encounter” (Verduin 67). Updike is curious, chiefly, about how the self can navigate the dichotomies of male and female, and his stories reflect this inquiry.

In many ways, “Gesturing” is the story of an individual’s (mostly Richard’s, and to a lesser extent, Joan’s) struggle to make sense of life outside the bonds of traditional marriage. Despite Richard’s desire to abandon his marriage, he seems even more lost

outside of it, as he spends listless hours alone in his apartment. His longing for the romance of marriage is symbolized by his discovery of marriage vows left by the previous tenants: “Days passed before he realized that, on the old glass near his nose, the wavy panes of his own window, ghostly previous tenants armed with diamonds had scratched initials, names, dates, and, cut deepest and whitest of all, the touching, comical vow, incised in trisyllabic lines” (803). The vow, “With this ring/ I thee wed,” which Updike describes as both “touching” and “comical,” echoes through the story as a reminder to Richard of his broken marriage. Verduin has suggested that typically “Updike’s males experience their shock of *angst* in the presence of an unsympathetic woman, seemingly the hero’s necessary foil” (64, italics in original). But in this case, Richard’s unsympathetic foil is tellingly absent; divorce is not the escape Richard had hoped it would be.

In fact, Richard’s separation from his wife actually complicates his relationship with his mistress. Rather than allowing him to more freely enjoy Ruth’s sexuality, he reverts to trying to make a wife of her. In a scene set in a New York hotel, Ruth complains about the prospect of marrying him post-divorce and “losing her name in the false assumption of his” (805). Richard answers her that it’s just a “convenience” or a “gesture”—another nod to the title and the immateriality of the marriage construct. This move is typical of Updike’s male heroes; as Allen writes, “Updike’s men are particularly dependent upon [women], and the first thing a man does when he leaves one woman (and he seldom leaves his wife permanently) is to find another, never considering the possibility of remaining alone” (104). For Richard, being alone is paramount to a sort of psychological oblivion. At some level, his ability to enjoy a woman’s company is

restricted to his potential for enjoying her as either a wife or a mistress, but never as an individual. So it's not marriage itself that Richard Maple, John Updike or *Playboy* are trying to escape, but instead the culture of marriage that restricts the consumption-driven individual.

The question for men like Richard Maple becomes how to satisfy the needs of selfhood while simultaneously meeting the demands of marriage. As Tallent writes: "The desire for retreat, and the equal and opposite yearning for erotic risk, provide the primary tensions for much of Updike's fiction. His heroes have a way of seeming almost physiologically bereft in bachelorhood. They seem more unwifed than single" (3). The suggestion that Richard is simply "unwifed" implies a lack of self-actualization, and, interestingly, Ruth the mistress is much closer to self-actualization than her male counterpart. She resists the "gesture" of Richard's proposal because she seems to understand that traditional marriage endangers her sense of selfhood: "'But I like who I am now,' she protested. That was, indeed, her central jewel, infrangible and bright: she liked who she was" (805). The fact that Richard cannot locate his identity outside of his marriage, and Ruth fears losing hers inside of one, shows that *Playboy* fiction's take on domesticity was far more complicated than just an extended anti-marriage rant.

The gradual dissolution of the Maples' marriage, though, provides an opportunity for Joan Maple to indulge in self-gratification. She has taken her own lover, and Updike hides this character in the background of the story in a technique that formally mirrors Richard's own hesitance to acknowledge his wife's adultery. Because Richard feels threatened about being replaced sexually—and because he is also uncomfortable with Joan's potential for individual fulfillment outside their marriage—he complains to his

wife about his mistress. In order to romanticize the Maples' marriage, he says about Ruth: "And the worst thing is, for all this explaining, for all this glorious fucking, she's still not real to me, the way—you are" (806). Here, we see Verduin's "self-irony" in Updike; the author doesn't believe that marriage makes a relationship "real" even though Richard Maple insists on it. Joan is initially unwilling to agree with Richard's version of a "real" relationship, instead asking him, "So is your fucking really glorious?" Richard is embarrassed by having said it, and explains that "It usually is...between people who aren't married" (807).

Instead of moving toward an inevitable divorce, the Maples reaffirm the value of the marriage. While Joan describes her own adultery, Richard shies away from this reality and instead attempts to redefine the "real" intimacy of his marriage: "He saw through her words to what she was saying—that these lovers, however we love them, are not us, are not sacred as reality is sacred. We are reality. We have made children. We gave each other our young bodies. We promised to grow old together" (808). Verduin persuasively reads this passage as one in which "the sacred moves intentionally from exceptional to ordinary, a sacralization of domesticity with its comforting responsibilities, shared jokes, and complicated layers of intimacy" (73). Her relocation of the sacred into everyday life suggests some hope for the Maples (though their cycle eventually concludes with a divorce) and the chance for real fulfillment in marriage for individuals. After all, the final line of "Gesturing" is a hopeful one. Richard "knew that she would never stop gesturing within him, never; though a decree came between them, even death, her gestures would endure, cut into glass" (809). Richard recognizes that the gestures of his marriage will somehow endure, just as Updike and other midcentury writers focused on

marital relations knew that marriage was an imperfect but enduring institution. Even the most radical activists of the 60s couldn't realistically imagine a complete abolition of marriage within their lifetimes, and the most ardent of playboys didn't envision a world completely bereft of romantic commitment.

The couple's marriage functions symbolically as a barometer for midcentury Americans' increasingly complicated approaches to wedding and divorce. At stake is the fate of the individual, and critics have identified the tension between Richard and Joan's individual identities and the demands of their marriage. Rosen correctly points out that in the early Maples stories, "they are not Joan and Richard. They are 'the Maples.'" But she goes too far when she asserts that "individuality, equality and singularity are lost" in the marriage and they fundamentally "regain individuality and equality in the final story as they divorce" (22). John Updike's fiction and *Playboy* went beyond a simple equation of singleness with self-actualization and instead sought the stories that might prove that marriage and individuality could work in concert. *Playboy's* push for a reformulation of marriage implied obvious benefits for men, and the magazine catered specifically to what editors saw as important male issues. But because these supposedly male issues were more fundamentally issues of the consumerist self, redefining marriage along lines of individualism offered potential gains for both genders. Although Ehrenreich's *Hearts of Men* suggests that the dissolution of marriage would end financial security for many women, she concedes that marriage reform worked "toward an androgynous goal that most feminists—or humanists—could only applaud. The possibility of honest communication between the sexes has increased" (170). With its short stories decrying

the plight of the individual under the model of economic dependency in marriage, *Playboy* capitalized on a societal shift toward gender equality.

After the 60s, stories about marriage remained a crucial part of the *Playboy* fiction legacy and offer a provocative window into the development of marriage culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A 1982 Laurie Colwin story titled “My Mistress” places the male in the role of mistress, an inversion showing the progress made in gender relations in the 25 years since *Playboy*’s inception. The cheating husband’s affection for his mistress’ imperfections implies a more authentic version of love that accounts for these flaws:

In movies, men have mistresses who soothe and pet them, who are consoling, passionate and ornamental. But I have a mistress who, while she is passionate, is mostly grumpy. Traditional things mean nothing to her. She does not flirt, cajole or wear fancy underwear. She has taken to referring to me as her ‘little bit of fluff’ and she refers to me as her mistress, as in the sentence “Before you became my mistress, I led a blameless life.” (444)

The affair isn’t part of a “blameless life,” but rather part of a relationship that acknowledges imperfections and transcends “traditional things.” The affair is characterized as charming and beautiful, and yet somehow still a bit naughty—perfectly fitting the character of *Playboy* magazine. Although we might consider that *Playboy*’s centerfolds were decidedly unreal—airbrushed, oversexed male-gaze fantasies—the magazine’s fiction represented a counterweighted picture of real relationships in which traditional gender roles had become limiting and obsolete.

Through its critical stance on traditional marriage arrangements, *Playboy* fiction scrutinized the institution as out of step with the patterns of individual consumption permeating postwar society. Hefner's vision of the consumption-defined individual moved toward the cultural center as the old standards of the good life were replaced by new criteria of personal freedom and consumer pleasures. Hefner's consumerism required self-centered individuals—not the staid husbands of his father's generation—to buy into the *Playboy* philosophy. Concurrently, American fiction celebrated an advent of self-actualization with its emphasis on individual literary styles and stories about seeking self-gratification over service to larger social institutions like marriage. Therefore, the first-person point of view in "My Mistress" is profoundly significant precisely because it is the individual's experience within a marriage or sexual relationship that matters most under the *Playboy* philosophy. Colwin's narrator believes his marriage with a woman named Vera works precisely because of a mutual respect for freedom: "Vera has men friends. I have women friends. The first principle of a good marriage is freedom." (448)

### **Chapter Three: "I'M GOING TO LIVE MY OWN WAY"**

By the beginning of the 1970s *Playboy* had reached a peak circulation of 7 million and a new plateau in cultural relevancy. In October 1971, editors organized the Playboy International Writer's Convocation at the Playboy Towers Hotel in Chicago; the event drew writers such as James Dickey and Jon Cheever and, according to Steven Watts, "confirmed *Playboy's* prestigious position in the world of American letters" (298). Moreover, the magazine's rise in sales and growing reputation as a respectable literary

venue signaled an important shift for the *Playboy* philosophy: it was no longer at odds with mainstream culture.

Hefner's swinging parties of the late 50s seemed tame in comparison with movements for free love and open marriages. Although he had long supported civil rights for black Americans—and *Playboy* published the final piece ever written by Martin Luther King, Jr. after his visit to Hefner's mansion in 1967 (Watts 216)—Hefner's progressive racial politics seemed far more commonplace by 1970. Second-wave feminists were winning important battles for reproductive rights and job equality with or without the aid of *Playboy*, and hippies found the magazine's consumerism reeked of the establishment.

*Playboy's* subversive attitude no longer formed the edge of American culture but rather fell closer to the center. The magazine's forums transformed from a place for boys behaving badly to a place where the modern man could seek practical advice on relationships and sex. Hefner engaged in a long and complicated battle with those he considered "radical feminists" and increasingly found himself defending more traditional ideas of gender. As a consumer publication, *Playboy* often responded quickly to changing attitudes and cultural trends in the 1970s, but the magazine's fundamental devotion to consumption remained the same. Subsequently, the magazine's editors chose fiction that translated *Playboy's* core consumerist values into stories of individuals who sought Hefner's "good life" even in a climate of social revolution.

One such story was Joyce Carol Oates' debut in *Playboy*, October 1970's "Saul Bird Says: Relate! Communicate! Liberate!" The story, which won *Playboy's* fiction award that year and was later republished as "Pilgrim's Progress," satirizes leftist politics

through the character of Saul Bird, an American professor who seeks to upset the order of a Canadian college campus. Bird is diametrically opposed to the entrenched powers he encounters, and coeds are quick to form a cult of personality around his subversive rhetoric. But Bird is no playboy-hero; he denies the students' sexual advances, and he becomes an object of ridicule for Oates as his call-to-action results in only a muddled rebellion that fails to change the college. The magazine's editors loved this story because it clarified the *Playboy* philosophy's goals. Subversive or progressive behavior was fine, the story suggests, but only so long as it came in the pursuit of consumer pleasures.

Oates' decision to publish in *Playboy*, though, incurred a harsh reaction from feminist groups that thought the author's work was out of place next to the bared breasts of the Playmates. The National Organization for Women, one of Hefner's chief opponents, issued a call for women writers like Oates to boycott publishing in *Playboy*. But in a move emphasizing her individuality, Oates responded with an open letter explaining her decision to publish in the magazine. She asserted that the organization might reevaluate its position on the content of *Playboy*: "I cannot claim to have much interest in the pictorial aspect of *Playboy*, but I see no reason to focus upon certain pages and deliberately to neglect the very real presence of others" that included "some very interesting fiction." In fact, Oates argued, the political possibilities of mixing fiction, journalism and erotica had a democratizing effect and could even spur necessary conversation. She continued in the letter:

I have never published anything in any magazine on the basis of my agreeing, entirely, with every page of that magazine. In a democratic society, there must be avenues of communication in publications that

appeal to a wide variety of people, otherwise writers with certain beliefs will be read only by people with those same beliefs, and change or growth would come to an end. *Playboy* is astonishingly liberal, and even revolutionary in certain respect.

Oates continued to publish in *Playboy* throughout her career partly because she understood that her work reached audiences that would otherwise rarely read it. And she was hesitant to view *Playboy* as simple consumerist propaganda because she was wary that her own work could be similarly misconstrued as strictly feminist literature. As Oates scholar Greg Johnson writes about her short fiction: “Oates has adhered stubbornly to a viewpoint which, while it is harshly critical of a tradition that ignores women, is equally skeptical of feminists who seem to view art primarily as propaganda” (6). In her letter to N.O.W., she advised feminists that the magazine’s attention to sex was “typically American and is fairly innocuous” and that “anger over *Playboy* and its hedonistic philosophy is possibly misdirected.”

The more apt target, perhaps, was the feminist movement itself; Oates suggests that feminist preoccupation with Hefner’s magazine drew energy and attention away from more significant public policy issues. She facilitates a similar scrutiny in “Saul Bird” by questioning whether the titular character actually means to reform the university system to help students or just to establish himself as a revolutionary figurehead. Oates scrutinizes the authenticity of Saul Bird’s exchanges with his followers with the formal technique of framing their conversations in a dramatic dialogue:

Saul Bird: What conclusions have you come to?

Doris: That I was an infant. I was enslaved.

Saul Bird: And what now?

Doris: Now I am totally free.

Saul Bird: You're exaggerating to gain our respect.

Doris: No, I'm free. I'm free. I detest my parents and everything they stand for—I'm free of them—I am my own woman, entirely!

The irony of Doris' freedom is obvious: she has liberated herself from the abstract idea of her "parents and everything they stand for" and has instead chosen a blind devotion toward Saul Bird. But Oates presents this exchange as a play to emphasize the performative nature of revolutionary speech; Bird even implicitly suggests that "exaggerating" rebellious feelings would earn the respect of the students' movement. But Doris has no identity in the story outside of this dramatic exchange. She is not her own woman, as she claims, but Saul Bird's; and consequently she lacks the sort of self-actualization that the *Playboy* philosophy required for its version of the good life.

Part of that "good life," too, was sex—but not the sort of communal sex that came with cults like Saul Bird's. Hefner's consumerist version called for individuals to recognize sexual ownership in themselves and others. But in "Saul Bird" the leaders and students disavow their sexualities. Despite Bird's feigned disinterest in sex, his appeal is subtly sexual; the coed followers have taken to sleeping in his home and communing in all-night intellectual jam sessions. On the other hand, Bird's foil, a staid professor named Erasmus Hubben, is actually sexually disempowered: "He liked students at a distance. Women made him extremely nervous. His female students were as colorful as partridges and unpredictable—so many flutterings, the darting of eyes and hands!" (246) Hubben stands opposite Bird not only in terms of sexuality but also in his politics; he initially

resists invitations to Bird's group and supports the university's establishment. He lacks Bird's social appeal, but because Hubben displays a devotion to his own career and self-interest, he is a threat to Bird's movement that thrives on depressing individualist notions.

Hubben's opposition to Bird's group is complicated when he finds himself having feelings for a new professor named Wanda, who "attracted Hubben's eye: Vague in her speech, flat-chested, her eyes watery with emotion or shyness, she did not upset Hubben at all" (248). At Wanda's urgings, Hubben joins the student group. But his inclusion and propensity for free-thinking are unacceptable to Bird, who seizes on Hubben's sexuality as a point of scrutiny. In one of the group sessions, Bird abstractly demands that Hubben tell everyone "the truth," and Hubben eventually admits he has racist tendencies. But this isn't what the group is after, and Bird repeatedly asks Hubben about "your inclinations" and "your obsessions" (252). In this moment, the supposedly progressive Saul Bird reverts to a hegemonic tactic of challenging Hubben's sexuality in order to disempower him, and it works:

"Your homosexual desire for me," Saul Bird said flatly.

Hubben sat without moving.

"Well?" said Saul Bird. "Why are you so silent?"

"I don't—I don't--" Hubben wiped his forehead with both hands. He could not bear the gaze of Saul Bird, but there was nowhere else to look. And then, suddenly, he heard his own voice saying, "Yes, I admit it. It's true." (252)

This climactic episode in the story demands a complex reading. Bird's inclination toward challenging Hubben's heterosexuality reveals his hypocrisy: he disempowers, rather than empowers, Hubben through this forced disavowal of sexuality. Whether Hubben is gay or

straight is inconsequential; Bird simply seeks to remove Hubben's ownership of that sexuality as a means to destabilizing the professor's sense of self.

Bird's central hypocrisy—claiming group empowerment while actually disempowering each of the group's members—is representative of the revolution's larger aims. The group calls for a removal of the college's old professors, but those professors like Hubben are the ones actually providing direction to the student body. Hubben is so disturbed by Bird's psychological tactics that he later rips off his clothes in public in a fit of madness, and his fate represents the danger of following through on Bird's unreasonable agenda. The story ends when Saul Bird is fired and disappears, leaving his followers to fend for themselves in the institutional unrest he created. After Bird departs, Bird's son tells Wanda to forget about him because his father “has no particular interest in women” (258). Wanda, who shared in the group's attraction to Bird, says she can't believe that the leader would simply abandon his followers, and the boy tells her, simply, “then don't believe it” (258). This straightforward directive derives from Oates' suspicion that wide-ranging social movements of the 70s relied on the misplaced beliefs of easily-influenced followers; the best antidote was simply refusing to believe in charismatic leaders with radical ideas.

Rather than joining in cultural revolutions, *Playboy* gradually adopted a conservative posture through its emphatic insistence on self-interest. Even when the magazine became more outlandish in the 70s—with Hefner publishing lurid details of his own sexual exploits—the magazine's philosophy remained one of emphasized personal pleasure trumping any larger social consciousness. Oates' story harmonizes with this emphasis on individuality, and the fact that she was a woman writer shows that *Playboy*

was increasingly aware that its consumerist ethic could apply to women, too. Propagating a sense of individual identity worked in service of *Playboy*'s consumerism, and Joyce Carol Oates' distinct authorial persona added a layer of individuality to her publications in the magazine. Each writer brought some new literary styling to *Playboy*'s fiction legacy, but few are as important in terms of individualism as Vladimir Nabokov. In "A Personal View of Nabokov," Oates essayed that he was a "tragic figure" in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature because of his aesthetic singularity. And, she writes, Nabokov's stories often accentuated the independence of his voice: "Nabokov empties the universe of everything except Nabokov" (107). This emphasis on self was exactly what *Playboy* fiction were looking for.

The Russian writer's first foray into the pages of *Playboy* came in December 1971 with a story titled "The Dashing Fellow," which serves as an intellectual testing ground for the hedonistic impulses of Hefner's philosophy. The tale's narrator is a traveling salesman and habitual womanizer who casually mixes the pronouns "I" and "we"—a technique by which Nabokov cleverly implicates *Playboy* readers into the dashing fellow's sexual exploits. The story follows one night with Kostya as the salesman beds and then heartlessly abandons a strange woman. Nabokov's intricate levels of irony problematize Kostya's love-her-and-leave-her attitude; although Kostya implores us to celebrate his exploits, we instead are left with an ambiguous stance on the character's sexual aggressiveness.

Kostya's motivation is simple: "What is better—the experience of a sexy thirty-year-old brunette or the silly young bloom of a bright-curved romp? Today the former is the better, and tomorrow we shall see" (271). He craves sex, and getting it is an

unquestionably good thing. But Kostya's philandering is potentially problematic for those around him, and so his hedonistic attitude brings questions of morality to the surface even though some critics resist drawing any moral conclusions from Nabokov's work. In "Blindness in Obsession as Portrayed in Nabokov's 'A Dashing Fellow,'" Brian Quinn argues that "just as in *Lolita*, the reader must remember that no moralizing will be found, there is no overt criticism of the social miscreant that the salesman represents" (26). But I would argue that Quinn's reading is overly forgiving in its shying away from morality and focusing instead on the "alluring energy of Konstantin's emotion" (31). The intimate relationship between Kostya and the reader—buttressed by his blunt honesty and appeals to the reader's understanding—invites us to empathize with his problematic approach to women. Empathizing with such a womanizer obviously clashes with mainstream moral sensibilities; Kostya is as much the playboy-run-amok as Hefner, who began in the 70s to fill his magazine with long and self-serving political diatribes. In this way, Nabokov's story encourages a subtle understanding that even Hefner's consumerist hedonism must operate within limits.

For instance, the original ideations of Hefner's playboy acknowledged sexual impulses while maintaining control over those urges. But Kostya is seemingly unable to control his sexual appetite. He functions as an agent for the male gaze that pervades *Playboy's* pages; he rides a train on his business trips and uses the anonymity of the train window as the means to fetishize women he passes:

A girl, her bust enclosed in white wool, stood talking to a man, now joining her bare arms behind her back, swaying slightly and beating her buttocks with her handbag, now folding her arms on her chest and

stepping with one foot upon the other, or else, holding her handbag under her arm and with a small snapping sound thrusting nimble fingers under her glossy black belt; thus she stood, and laughed, and sometimes touched her companion in a valedictory gesture, only to resume at once her twisting and turning: a sun-tanned girl with a heaped-up hairdo that left her ears bare, and a quite ravishing scratch on her honey-hued upper arm. She does not look at us, but never mind, let us ogle her fixedly. In the beam of the gloating tense glance, she starts to shimmer and seems about to dissolve. (270)

Nabokov describes this passing vision with one complex and shifting sentence that focuses on “her bust” and “buttocks” in its first clauses before describing distinguishing characteristics like the scratch on her arm. Although the breasts and buttocks initially catch Kostya’s attention, it’s the mark on her arm that most captures his imagination because it promises a unique and individualized sexual experience. Kostya implicates the reader in his gaze by claiming she does not see “us,” but the power of the gaze itself seems to cause the vision to dissolve. Because Nabokov has transformed an individual experience of sexual attraction into a shared one, the experience seems to lack authenticity; instead of enjoying the ogling of this girl, the reader recognizes the selfishness of Kostya’s gaze.

That gaze becomes an aggressive sexual pursuit as soon as Kostya disembarks the train. He stalks a middle-age woman named Sonja Bergmann whom he describes as having “breasts like a pair of piggies, slim hips” (272). After the couple reaches Sonja’s apartment, she explains why she’s single: “I had a husband, it was a dreadful marriage,

and I said to myself: Enough! I'm going to live my own way" (272). Her desire to live her "own way" distinguishes Sonja's individuality, but this fact is lost on Kostya, who would prefer the moral ambiguity afforded by denying that Sonja is a person. He focuses instead on contemplating how long he will have to wait to have intercourse with the woman, and he calculates the costs of his sexual exploits as they relate to his trade as a salesman. "After all, say what you will, but the mainspring of life is robust romance," Kostya claims. "Can't concentrate on business unless I take care first of my romantic interests" (270). Even while he's engaged in the seduction of Sonja, Kostya relays his story in these decidedly unromantic terms that expose his parallel pursuit of both sex and money. The fact that he can't do his job without first "consuming" sex is an exaggeration of the consumption-oriented philosophy espoused by *Playboy*.

But Kostya's sex drive is frustrated in "The Dashing Fellow" because he is too eager to bed his quarry; he seeks conquest but moves too quickly to enjoy the experience. Quinn correctly observes that "the reader seems to rush through the story at an ever increasing pace" (27), as Nabokov's prose mirrors the character's impatience with staccato syntax and an absence of sensory detail. Unconvinced by Kostya seduction attempts, Sonja leaves the apartment to run an errand. Meanwhile, Kostya receives a message that Sonja's father is on his deathbed, but he decides to withhold this information until she has sex with him. When the couple eventually begins having sex, Nabokov shifts the point of view away from the first person (the mix of "I" and "we" that had dominated the story) to the third person to create a new distance between Kostya and the reader. The sex ends in a premature ejaculation: "she started to giggle helplessly, his fingernails kept catching in the knit silk of her green undies and everything happened

very ineffectually, uncomfortably and prematurely” (275) that leaves Kostya dissatisfied with the episode. In his disillusionment, Kostya’s male gaze once again loses its shimmer: “No, it was not worth the trouble. Thank you kindly for the treat. Wasting my strength. I’m no longer in the bloom of youth. Rather disgusting. Her perspiring nose, her faded mug” (275). Kostya finds the physical letdown odious, no doubt, but his disappointment is crystallized in his sentiment that this sexual consumption was “not worth the trouble”—that the commodified sex he bought wasn’t on par with the price he paid.

This capitalist calculation of sexual relations, like Kostya’s rampant hedonism, goes beyond Hefner’s vision of consumer pleasure. The playboy figure is a man who never has to overtly pay for sex, instead preferring to operate under the guise of romance with help from the magazine’s material offerings. And although a *Playboy* reader could purchase the magazine as an aid to satisfying his own sexual urges, this form of sex-for-pay is, arguably, less harmful because models are not exposed to the same dangers as prostitutes. Hefner’s magazine was built on both sex and capital exchange, but it intentionally obscured the ties between the two, always preferring instead to talk about things like romance or pleasure. *Playboy* operates under an ideal that its offerings are less important to the individual than actual, real-world relationships; the magazine is a guide to the good life and not the entirety of the good life. The magazine seems relatively conservative for sex theorist Alan Soble, who places *Playboy* in line with other mainstream notions of sexual fulfillment by suggesting the magazine upheld the idea “that having full-bodied relationships is an obligation, or is a mode of existence morally superior to casual sex, or that, in comparison with a life of cold fucks or solitary

masturbation with pornography, being couples and working damn hard at it is more suitable to the dignity of the human being” (169). Soble’s “dignity of the human being” is an iteration of the individualism that formed the core of the *Playboy* philosophy, and Nabokov’s “dashing fellow” is most acutely guilty of not respecting another human being’s individuality.

Kostya’s approach to women is deplorable, but his decision not to tell Sonja about her dying father is even more morally suspect. After sex, Kostya claims to need a cigar and leaves without mentioning the father—partly as a punishment for the unsatisfying sex. As Kostya abandons the scene to catch a train out of town, Nabokov returns to the “we” pronoun as a way of universalizing the experience: “The train was crammed, the heat stifling. We feel out of sorts but do not quite know if we are hungry or drowsy. But when we have fed and slept, life will regain its looks and the American instruments will make music in the merry café described by our friend Lange. And then, sometime later, we die” (276). Kostya’s feeling of unease puzzles him because it doesn’t seem like it could be fixed by consumption—it is not as simple as being “hungry or drowsy”—but is instead the aftereffect of unbridled hedonism. The “American instruments” represent, in this passage, the material pleasures of society, but those distractions don’t seem to fully compensate for the profound dissatisfaction Kostya feels. The story’s fatalistic endnote seems to invalidate all of Kostya’s spirited pursuit of pleasure, implying that something more important lies beyond the reach of selfish consumption.

Publishing Nabokov’s story signaled that *Playboy* was still, in some ways, philosophically conservative despite its publisher’s increasingly erratic behavior in the 70s. When the magazine began in the 50s, it unabashedly urged men to purchase the

indulgent lifestyle that *Playboy* believed American men deserved, but by the 70s, it adopted a more nuanced approach to consumer life. Rather than living like Nabokov's Kostya, the 70s version of *Playboy* sought the limits of self-interest. Both the "Dashing Fellow" and "Saul Bird" read like subtle bogey-man stories to the socially conservative playboy; Hefner imagined neither the heartless hedonist nor the hypocritical radical as models for 20<sup>th</sup> century manhood. Instead, the stories in *Playboy* fiction during the 70s continued to privilege the self-interested individual as the key to understanding Hefner's "good life" philosophy—a lifestyle, as it turned out, that needed to respect its own limits. The increasing divergence between the magazine's fiction—which more closely upheld Hefner's original style than the magazine's 70s editorial missteps—began an era in which *Playboy*'s identity crisis threatened its cultural legacy.

### **Conclusion: STORIES FOR THE GIRLS NEXT DOOR**

In December 2012 I met my first *Playboy* writer. Steve Almond is most known for his bestselling nonfiction book, *Candyfreak*, but he also boasts an impressive list of fiction publications that includes multiple *Playboy* stories with titles like "Appropriate Sex" (2003) or "How to Love a Republican" (2001). He was frank about his experience with the magazine; he told me editors looked for stories that were sexy but not oversexed. And the sex at the heart of these stories, he said, needed to focus on heterosexual encounters without anything too kinky or abnormal. For a writer like Almond, whose public readings are laced with profanity and include his rules for writing good sex scenes, the *Playboy* stories are peculiarly conservative.

Why publish in the magazine, then? Almond's rationale echoed many of the writers who have appeared in *Playboy's* pages for the last forty years: it pays. Even for writers of considerable literary fame, the short story market can bear little financial fruit. *Playboy* still pays well for pieces of writing that might otherwise go unpublished as standalone stories. The short story form has remained more important for Hefner and his editors than for almost all other consumer magazines.

Almond recalled once going to a newsstand to buy copies of the *Playboy* in which one of his stories appeared, and he felt a vague embarrassment over buying the magazines. For Almond, who often writes erotica, the shame didn't stem from *Playboy's* reputation for nude pictures. Rather, buying multiple copies of *Playboy* potentially sent a false signal to that newsstand attendant that Almond was genuinely interested in the culture that the magazine continues to represent—a culture of materiality, celebrity and heteronormative ogling.

That culture, though, has been left behind. If buying a *Playboy* in 1963 was an act of individualism and sexual subversion, buying a *Playboy* in 2013 is the opposite. More than anything, the magazine is now a product of cultural nostalgia, and buying a copy equates only to the consumption of one of mass media's myriad lifestyle offerings. Hefner's dream of all-out consumerism never exactly materialized; he couldn't have anticipated the effects of feminism, the rise of evangelicals or shifts toward globalism changing American's sexual culture. Although he was mostly right about the proliferation of consumer culture, he couldn't have imagined himself as a cultural punch line in 2013, and his magazine's half-century of publishing now seems more like an extensive record of a thwarted male fantasy.

Perhaps *Playboy's* cultural relevance in the past decade came not from the magazine itself but from Hefner's reality show, *The Girls Next Door*. The show debuted in 2005, when television's market for celebrity-domestic documentary television had begun to boom. The America public seemed hungry for an inside look into the everyday lives of celebrities, and the sensational history of Hefner and his three young, blonde girlfriends provided instant drama.

The show was a surefire hit and ran for six seasons. But Hefner acted as only background decoration for the show—an aged and sometimes meandering grandfather figure looming over the hijinks of his girlfriends Holly, Bridget and Kendra. Viewers were uninterested in his politics or his legacy; he certainly didn't command attention as the icon of social revolution he'd been in previous decades. Rather, his aptly named *The Girls Next Door* drew in audiences by its attempts to normalize the lifestyles of Hef's harem. The show's narratives framed the trio of bombshells as traditional American women attempting to claim their own careers, forming important bonds with other women and enjoying the consumer pleasures afforded by their position. Producers even attempted to align their polygamous arrangement to mainstream marriage by emphasizing scenes of romantic love while skirting sexual scenes with the pajama-clad husband.

Rather than antagonizing traditional politics—the way Hefner operated his magazine in its heyday—the reality show affirmed what viewers already believed about sexual freedom and the importance of consumerism. The show's female viewers were implicitly asked to assent to Hefner's sexual arrangements as part of the high-class lifestyle he offered to his girlfriends. Hefner's sexual arrangement with these three

young, buxom women wasn't treated as any sort of scandal by the show's producers, stars or audience—there was nothing surprising or edgy about it. Instead, the major appeal of the show was simple: watching three young women enjoy the pleasures of the *Playboy* lifestyle.

*Playboy*—the glossy paper version--is perhaps inevitably becoming outdated, but Hefner's philosophy of consumerism is still alive. The revenue sources of Playboy Enterprises, Inc. have moved away from print advertising to digital entertainment and the licensing of its brand, a move largely orchestrated by Hefner's daughter, Christine Hefner, who ran the company until 2009. Through this evolution, Playboy Enterprises still makes its money on selling the playboy lifestyle even if magazine circulation dips, and the bunny symbol has eclipsed the magazine in cultural relevance. The company has solidified the status symbol while the original print product is only marginally important.

So what becomes of the fiction that has always been part of the magazine's formula? *Playboy* continues to publish fiction and compete as a top market with one of the nation's most prestigious prizes for short fiction from college writers. In December 2009, the magazine won a bidding war to the rights of an unpublished Nabokov manuscript titled "The Original of Laura." But the continuing legacy of *Playboy* fiction exposes a growing breach between audiences seeking literature and those seeking erotic images. Perhaps Hefner dreamed of the American man as a lover of both world-class fiction and exposed nipples, but today's truth is that there are some readers who would prefer to see the Nabokov manuscript without thumbing past nude pictorials. In the early days of *Playboy*, its bawdy character harmonized with its editorial content, but now one might question if the erotic pictures limit the magazine's cultural relevancy.

After all, nearly 60 years of publishing under Hefner's formula has worn on *Playboy's* ability to create sufficient buzz about its nude pictorials. The magazine turned to themed pictorials (including a proposed "women of Starbuck's" issue that the company turned down) and celebrity spots to boost interest, but the heart of *Playboy's* marketing more adeptly turns on a sense of nostalgia than of excitement. *Playboy* is now the naughty magazine of a bygone era, tame by today's standards, a relic of your father's days of bachelorhood. The question is whether *Playboy's* devotion to fiction is similarly obsolete; today's consumer-oriented magazines still reach young male customers with bared skin and glossy products, but the literary offerings are conspicuously absent. This change demands we ask whether the short story still functions as a viable technology for transmitting the culture of the young American male—and if not, what that might mean for the future of mass media storytelling.

I've argued here that *Playboy* fiction delivered individualistically motivated narratives to a postwar culture clamoring for stories of self-gratification. These pieces acted as myths crucial for introducing Hefner's consumerist philosophies into popular culture. *Playboy* encouraged an indulgence in consumer pleasures and simultaneously offered up fiction as a distinct cultural product—playing part in both the supply and demand for this literature. The magazine's version of the American Dream in the late 1950s relied on stories with protagonists more interested in what they might gain from society than what they could contribute. Similarly, *Playboy's* stories imagined replacing the onerous bonds of traditional marriage with a more complex version of matrimony that freed Americans to indulge even more individual desires. These stories repeatedly told readers to consider their own interests first and foremost.

But this sense of individualism, like *Playboy's* ascendancy, passed out of the cultural vogue. As early as the 1970s, the magazine's fiction increasingly reflected an awareness that if every member of a society pursued his or her own self-interest, then interpersonal conflicts would inevitably follow. Negotiating these impasses would require a greater understanding of collective values. Perhaps this, too, was part of the appeal of *The Girls Next Door*—we wondered how three women accustomed to indulgence could ever share one octogenarian lover. Holly, Bridget and Kendra each represented compelling stories individually, but taken as a group they inspired more complex questions about ways in which modern women could aid or detract from each other's upward mobility. We might ask, too, if the intrusion of camera's into Hefner's world further complicated his efforts for authentic romance—the same way new communication technologies have led to questions about the changing nature of human connection. The complex realities of a television show like *The Girls Next Door* is only one example of the new facets of American culture to arise since *Playboy* first printed its inaugural issue. These changes imply a unique opportunity for fiction writers to respond to fluctuating cultural norms, and *Playboy*, I believe, could still serve as a venue for new stories.

As long as it continues to pay for quality writing, *Playboy* will remain a viable market for authors, but the magazine's cultural context will inevitably alter how its stories are selected and received. After all, Steve Almond's most erotic or subversive stories are too far from the mainstream for *Playboy*, and they are not what *Playboy* readers ask for. But those stories and countless others are still important narratives that ought to reach audiences, and only by publishing daring stories can Hefner's magazine play a part in the continuing developments of American culture. The combination of

naked centerfolds and literary work remains enticing not because it fits Hefner's vision of sophistication, but because it offers a juxtaposition of high and low culture that might provide us an accurate portrait of contemporary American character. In many ways, the legacy of *Playboy* fiction hinges on whether the magazine will simply publish stories that reinforce its cultural status or offer its readers something both surprising and satisfying. In order to move forward, *Playboy* must publish fiction that anticipates cultural progress rather than only looks nostalgically upon Hugh Hefner's "good life" that few, if any, Americans ever lived.

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