

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

ANNA BAGNARI  
*Universidad de Salamanca*

(Resumen)

Este artículo pretende definir la peculiar visión de Grace Paley sobre la maternidad. A lo largo de su narrativa breve, Paley retrata otra imagen de la madre, opuesta al modelo perfecto del sueño americano. Sus madres son solteras, o bien, la ausencia del hombre es notable. Estas mujeres establecen un lazo de amistades y apoyos con otras madres en condiciones similares. Crecen, cambian y evolucionan, basándose en sus experiencias maternas. Aunque nunca alcanzan el éxito social externo, tienen una alegría y fortaleza interior, se apoyan entre sí, educan responsablemente a sus hijos dándoles un trato de amigos, y están abiertas y comprometidas con los cambios sociales.

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

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

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

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

Paley pays a great homage to the word. The act of saying, telling stories is a political act, because it implies the decision of illuminating a hidden life, basically the lives of the underdogs, which is her way to make justice to the world. Critics have often accused her of stuffing too much politics into art; but her art and her involvement in community action, civil defence, pacifist and environmental activity cannot help being strictly linked, writing being an aspect of her political life.

Motherhood is Paley's great theme. Women and children are the protagonists of most of her stories. The present paper is an attempt at the definition of Paley's peculiar notion of motherhood, how it shapes the lives of her women, how they break the ordinary role and develop a new relationship with men, children, other women, the world itself.

The main character of Paley's stories is not the middle-class American housewife, the stereotyped 'mistress of the house', a popular cliché of American culture in the 1950s. On the contrary, it is the young unwed urban mother, the survivor of broken families, deserted by husbands and lovers. We find her in crummy kitchens of New York apartment

blocks, in the playgrounds of Lower West Side; we see her struggling to rear her kids, actively engaged in Parents and Teachers Associations. In spite of her single status, men being fleeting transients in her life, she is not alone: she is comforted and strengthened by the presence of her children and other women, "coworkers in the mother trade"<sup>1</sup>. She is the other face of the medal of the Doris-Day-culture, she undermines the golden dream behind which America is hiding its frailty and fear.

The reality Paley unveils in her work is rooted in her own biography. Since her childhood, Paley's family life was not restricted behind domestic walls, but had its natural extension on the street, where she witnesses the solidarity and comfort of many women's friendships. She continued to be part of the same sort of collective family when, having a family on her own, she shared diapers and benches in the park with those women who lived in her own neighbourhood. Even if she was married, most of the women she knew were living without men and, as for the children, "Mostly nobody had fathers"<sup>2</sup>. It is to tell about these women, about their condition of single parents, about the way this condition changes and moulds them that she started writing her stories.

Faith, the recurrent character through the three collections, sums up the characteristics of all these women. Some critics tend to identify her with her creator because they actually have some similarities; yet, Paley herself has declared that Faith is not her alter ego, but an invented character that lived through experiences and situations similar to hers and her friends'. Faith appeared for the first time in "The Used-Boy Raisers", included in LDM; in outlining her and the opening scene of the story, Paley had one of her friends and a real situation in mind: "When I first used her...she really is my friend, up to whose house I went...and I saw she was sitting there, and there were 'two husbands disappointed by eggs'... a present husband and a former husband and they were both sitting there complaining about the breakfast"<sup>3</sup>. This friend, however, represents but the initial step toward a further evolution of the character, which gradually takes on features of other close friends; without typifying any of them in particular, it eventually developed into a collective embodiment of them all, Paley herself included.

We can reconstruct the facts of Faith's life and the traits of her personality through the information scattered in the fourteen stories where she appears either as a protagonist, a narrator or a secondary figure. We can retrace the invisible thread that runs throughout these stories, the 'fabula' lying beneath what can be called Faith subnovel. Like Paley herself, Faith belongs to the second generation of American Jews; her parents, Eastern European immigrants, raised her on liberal principles; they defined themselves idealists and were actively committed to the Jewish cause. An idealist and an activist is their daughter too, who now goes around with armfuls of political leaflets crying out "U.S. Honor the Geneva Agreement"<sup>4</sup>. While they were engaged in keeping up Jewish consciousness and the role of the Jew in the world, Faith is questioning the nature of the role of Man in the

1. Paley, Grace, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, London: Virago Press, 1979, p. 78. Text quotations follow this edition. All references to the other collections are to: Paley, Grace, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, London: Virago Press, 1980; Paley, Grace, *Later the Same Day*, Penguin Books, 1987.

2. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 95.

3. Lidoff, Joan, "Clearing Her Throat: an Interview with Grace Paley", *Shenandoah*, 1981, 32(3), p. 10.

4. *Later the Same Day*, p 194.

contemporary world. Unlike her parents, Faith, nurtured as "an American child, free and independent"<sup>5</sup>, has dismissed any attachment to Jewish law and tradition, as well as any concern about the condition of the Jews in Israel. Though oblivious of her roots, Faith is not unaffected by them. Her identity has been built upon the dual heritage of Jewish-American culture; Jewish secular sense of tragedy, endurance and responsibility blends with the peculiar creed on which the American Dream is grounded: optimism, self-reliance and the belief in man's infinite possibilities of self-assertion. That is how Faith develops her 'rosy temperament'; that is why, in spite of the decay of her city, she keeps holding to a strong urban commitment; deserted by men, she does not nourish bitterness or cynicism but, as a middle-aged woman, she can still write love poems. Consistent to her allegorical name, she is sustained by a persistent hope in a happier future and she does not allow any negative experiences to overwhelm her, because "Rosiness is not a worse windowpane than gloomy gray when viewing the world"<sup>6</sup>.

Faith is a mother and, together with her bunch of unwed mothers, displays all the implications that Paley attributes to this role. There is a first observation we can draw after reading the stories of the first two collections: the marked difference between 'mother' and 'father' culture, as it emerges from the analysis of the language used by these mothers; through it, they express their powerlessness in a world still ruled and controlled by men. In most stories the rich play of dialogues, free direct speech, free direct thought proves the narrator's inability to control and order the subject matter in her hands. She is unable to transform life into language, because her language is inadequate for a reality she cannot either define or dominate. Faith herself admits that: "My language limitations here are real. My vocabulary is adequate for writing notes and keeping journals but absolutely useless for an active moral life. If I really knew this language, there would surely be in my head, as there is in Webster's or the Dictionary of American Slang, that unreducible verb designed to tell a person like me what to do next"<sup>7</sup>. She uses a non-linear language that does not follow the cause-and-effect progression, but is based on absolute unexpectedness. Her personal digressions, the play of trivial questions to which she herself answers puzzle her interlocutors, who sometimes do not really understand her. Paley's narrators mostly fail to establish a communication with the representatives of power (their children's teachers, policemen, local government officials), all embodiment of that reality they cannot reduce into comprehensible words. On a literary level, their powerless voice subverts a kind of narrative tradition where the artist, like God the father, creates and dominates his matter according to a linear hierarchical aesthetic code. On an extra-literary level, that implies the opposition to a system where the Father is in charge of power and authority. Using the imposed traditional role of women as child-raisers, Paley undermines from within not only the structure of the patriarchal culture, but also the mythos of the Father-artist.

The next common trait of Paley's women are cheerfulness and irony. The expression of their attitude before a reality of which they do not possess any certainty, irony is their natural way of exorcising the dissatisfaction and frustration of a position they dislike. Grace Paley's special kind of feminism is mirrored by these women who, without making any concession to the excesses and abstractions of the movement, are feminists 'by instinct': their witty, resilient voices are their powerful weapons of defence and offence. Secluded

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5. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 80.

6. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 174.

7. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 85.

from the world of men, their lives pivoting around serving them, being deserted by them and rearing children, these women outlet their rage through understatement. I'd like to point out a couple of passages, real jewels of Paley's wit. In "The Used-Boy Raisers" (LDM) Faith appears in a condition of captivity within the boundary of domesticity; a quiet presence, she prepares breakfast and listens to the conversation between her two husbands, the present and the former one. While they are engaged in 'lofty' comments about religion and education, she takes up her needle-work: "The ranch house that nestles in the shade of a cloud and Norway maple, just under the golden script (God Bless Our Home)<sup>8</sup>. That's what she embroiders. No direct or bitter remark could have been more effective than her silent and mocking criticism of the restricted condition of the 'realm of home'. Women are never resentful or acrimonious toward men, most of them self-centred and irresponsible; they reply to men's direct sharp verbal attacks in a contrasting, wisecracking language, as the woman in "Wants" (ECLM), who describes the effect produced by her husband's words: "He had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber's snake, could work its way through the ear down the throat, half-way to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment!"<sup>9</sup>

Cheerfulness is intrinsic to the work of mothering. To rear a child first of all means preserving his or her life, protecting and defending it from countless external menaces; a mother is so constantly involved in a vigilant relationship with a world beyond her control, to such an extent that to be cheerful is a necessity. This means "to see a child hopefully and to welcome her (his) hopes"<sup>10</sup>, avoiding to fall prey of excessive anxiety and over-protection. Paley's mothers perfectly embody this kind of maternal thinking, as we can see from the most immediate attitudes: they never shout worried remarks and warnings, nor repeatedly run after their kids in fear they may get dirty or hurt. Under the effect of the stress given to personal freedom and self-development, as emerged in the 1960s, they build nonhierarchical relationships, where children are treated as peers, often acting as friends and advisors. Faith wakes them up at night back from a date to complain about it; or she explains the geography of New York surroundings to her two-year old son almost in scientific terms and she realizes that sometimes she goes too far, painfully admitting that "I always treat Richard as though he's about forty-seven"<sup>11</sup>. These children often shows more common sense than their mothers; Richard warns Faith not to lose herself in abstract reasoning; he cuts to size her enthusiasm for living in a poor, racially mixed neighbourhood (which she considers a good 'training ground' for her children), reminding her of the actual dangers: "All those guys got knives anyway But you don't care if I get killed much, do you?"<sup>12</sup>

Not only do these children shake their mothers' sense of responsibility, but they are also the instruments of a process of deep change in them, from acquiescence to social commitment. If in the stories of the first collection the stress was on 'the little disturbances' that daily trouble men and women, the second collection celebrates those 'enormous

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8. *The Little Disturbances of Man*, p. 128.

9. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 5.

10. Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking. Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p. 84.

11. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p 94.

12. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 84.

changes' that Paley's women experience, educated by their "children's heartfelt brains"<sup>13</sup> to social and political consciousness. In "Faith in a Tree", deprived of male company and of the possibility of comprehending reality through man's ordained schemes, Faith is awakened to change by her son bitter rage and criticism. He strongly reacts at the view of a parade against the Vietnam war seeing that her mother and her friends do not take a clear stand before the opposition of the police. After this symbolic episode Faith is determined to transform her life, starting to think "more and more and everyday about the world"<sup>14</sup> In *Later the Same Day*, this theme strikes as the dominant note and assumes a wider significance: the 'private' and the 'public' strictly coexist and mutually interfere. What these women call "our private troubles" are the mistake of the World Trade Center, Westway, the decay of South Bronx, the rage in Williamsburgh<sup>15</sup>. They are getting old; middle age is near. New incidents come to upset their existence; the loss and death of children, parents and friends add up to the economical troubles, the provisional relationships with men and the poor jobs that, for years, have filled their daily life. Now, the present time, the disrupted 1980s, brings on new threats. A deep concern for the unsafe, unpredictable lives of their sons and daughters, the so called "what's-to-become-of-them-theme"<sup>16</sup>, is the central issue of the last collection. Car accidents, drugs, dropping out are only a few of the many dangers impending on children, only a part of that world that Faith and her friends have been trying to change. Nowhere else as in stories as "Friends", "Anxiety", "Ruthy and Edie", "The Expensive Moment" does motherhood emerges as a political issue, not merely as a private fact. For these women being a mother implies a strong commitment to the world; in giving birth and raising their sons they are involved in a deep, doublefold responsibility toward the world and toward their children themselves. First, they engage in educating, shaping their kids according to the values of their social group, and at the same time they try to produce persons acceptable to the world. This point is clearly shown at the end of "The Expensive Moment", where Faith discusses with a Chinese woman visiting the U.S. on chil-raising: "Shall we teach them to be straightforward, honorable, kind, brave, maybe shrewd, self-serving a little? What is the best way to help them in the real world?"<sup>17</sup> Secondly, they are responsible toward their children, trying to give them the best of the possible worlds.

Thus, to welcome change is a basic trait of Paley's female characters, grounded on maternal experience. Children grow, change and, like open structures, are subject to mysterious and irregular mutations. Paradoxically, in these stories, men, who are always leaving, moving, exploring exotic countries, "trying to get somewhere"<sup>18</sup>, are unable to translate those external changes into inner modifications. Women, on the contrary, though relegated within the narrower boundaries of home and playgrounds, live for change and diffusion.

First bearing, then rearing a child leads a woman to an open disposition toward the Other, reflected in the deep sense of community of Paley's women. They do not live motherhood as a private experience, but they share it with others mothers. The special bond

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13. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 100.

14. *Ibidem*

15. *Later the Same Day*, p. 87.

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

17. *L*, p. 195.

18. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 81.

that unites a mother with her child does not make them an isolated monad, but just because it is common to other women, it forms a fertile ground for close relationships to grow. Therefore, the children in these stories have another prerogative: they act as bridges among their mothers, they are the cement of many a longlife friendship.

Delimited by their maternal chores within a precise role and well-defined space, these mothers form a world of their own, detached and different in traits and values from the rest of society; they are out-siders, members of an 'anti-society' where men, seen both as opponents and objects of desire, make irregular sporadic raids. "Women...have been the pleasure and consolation of my entire life"<sup>19</sup>. These words, uttered by the head of the matriarchal family in "A Woman Young and Old" (LDM), sum up the essence of the subtle unexpected power that makes of them a privileged group.

Some critics do not hesitate to label them losers and failures. They clearly do not have strong ambitions, money, brilliant careers, glamorous partners; destiny has set them on a routine made of sour milk and roaches on the kitchen table, but they certainly have something that holds them from sinking into misery: the strength of deep mutual attachment and sustainment and the extratextual force of Paley's art which, in telling their stories, "saves a few lives"<sup>20</sup>.

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19. *The Little Disturbances of Man*, p. 28.

20. *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, p. 10.