

# THE ART OF STORYTELLING AS AN EXPLORATION OF RE-WRITING GENDER ROLES IN GRACE PALEY'S *A CONVERSATION WITH MY FATHER*

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## Abstract

This paper explores Grace Paley's *A Conversation with my Father*, which was first published in the *New American Review* (1972), from a feminist perspective precisely using terms by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *A Conversation with my Father* is about storytelling; the daughter entertains her father by telling him a story; hence, storytelling as an art is at the center of this study. The main theme of the story is considered to be a generation gap between the female author and her father, yet it mainly deconstructs the image of the father and the daughter into a dialectical female and male binary opposition. Consequently, this leads to a new meaning that shows the intricacy of the art of storytelling which informs a re-construction of gender roles. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on the complex role of the female narrator who verbally informs her father of her artistic creation of the story, and the complex role of her father who criticizes her story, and asks her to re-write it from his male perspective. Through the narrator's storytelling, women's roles as subject/object shed light on the perceived image of women in literature by a patriarchal system.

DOI: 10.21533/epiphany.v9i1.195

**Keywords:** *Grace Paley; Storytelling; Gender Roles; Writing style; Artistic Creation.*

Feminism started as a political movement that seeks equal rights for women politically, socially and economically (Abrams, p. 110). Women's suffrage rights movement started around the nineteenth century, however, women's criticism to the inequality between the sexes is traced back to the eighteenth century starting with Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797); in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she called for the equality of education between men and women and she questioned women's role in society. Other great authors who contributed to the feminist movement are John Stuart Mill's *the Subjection of a Woman* (1869) and the American Author, Margaret Fuller's *Women in The Nineteenth Century* (1845) (Abrams, p. 110).

Virginia Woolf was considered a monument in the feminist movement; her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) encouraged female authors to write (Plain and Sellers, p. 2). Likewise in France, Simon De Beauvoir was a pioneer in the feminist movement, her book *The Second Sex* (1949) was a valuable and precious book (Abrams, p. 110). Interrelated with the political battle for equality the second wave of feminist emerged, in this stage women were concerned with literary criticism. "Feminist literary criticism properly begins in the after math of 'second-wave' feminism, the term usually given to the emergence of women's movement in the United States and Europe during the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960" (Plain and Sellers, p. 2).

Since 1969 there has been a blast in feminist criticism writings that included all the fields of studies (Abrams, p. 110). The feminist study is not limited to a certain field; it's expanded to include different studies from different domains as explained by *The Norton*

*Anthology of Literary Criticism:*

While there is no single feminist literary criticism, there are a half dozen interrelated projects: exposing masculinity, stereotypes, distortions, and omissions in male dominated literature; studying female creativity, genre, styles, themes, and works by women. Developing feminist theoretical concepts and methods; examining forces that shape women's life, literature and criticism, ranging across psychology, biology and cultural history (Leitch et al, p. 23).

Therefore, feminist studies in different fields agree on three assumptions: the first is that society is male-centered and controlled by patriarchy, the second assumption is that gender is determined by social factors as explained in Abrams' terminology "while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender- of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and in behavior are largely, if not entirely, social constructs"(Abrams, p. 111). The third assumption is that literature is male- dominant and it invades the female's world imposing on her certain images that determine her existence (Abrams, p. 111).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and The nineteenth-Century Literary imagination* question the meaning of being a female author in a patriarchal oppressing society. They study the female authors and their works and how they were criticized by male authors and critics. The male critics and authors impose on women images that dehumanize and reduce them to mere stereotypes; these images are deepened by the language, style, and metaphor used by men in literature. In contrast with Harold Bloom's theory "anxiety of influence" shows the aggressive competition between the father and son to avoid the traces of the ancestors in writing, and both authors argue that women should reverse this aggressive competition by achieving the meaning of the secret sisterhood. Female authors' struggle is called "the anxiety of authorship" because female authors are eager to break the boundaries that prevent them from writing. Therefore, women started by struggling with patriarchal socialization, then they became resistant readers to the patriarchal literature, and they revised the masculine stereotyping of women.

Feminist critics used deconstruction as a method to analyze the literary work to reach the hidden meaning. Deconstruction theory first originated by Jacques Derrida (Abrams, p. 70); it is identified as "A deconstructive reading sets out to show the conflicting forces within the text itself serves to dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meaning into an into an indefinite array of incompatible and undecidable possibilities" (Abrams, p. 69). Moreover, studying women as a subject requires to study the historical moment in which the events of the story took place according to new historicism, Louise Montrose described the new historicism as "a reciprocal concern with history of texts and the textuality of history" (qtd. In Abrams, p. 219) Hayden White uses the term "what must have been the case" (p. 1714). This question helps in studying the historical background of both the author and the story to show the relation between the historical moment and the events of the story.

The father signifies the male authors and the male critics who demands that the female author should write as male authors do. He believes that his daughter used to write as Russian authors used to write. He says: "I would like you to write a simple story just once more," he continues: "The kind Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write, just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next" (Paley, p. 1). Therefore, the father doesn't appreciate the writings of his daughter and he forces her to write in the same way that Chekhov writes. The father looks down at his daughter's stories in comparison to the stories written by Maupassant.

This superior attitude to women's writings was an obstacle that stood in the face of

female authors for centuries in the patriarchal society especially in the nineteenth century as stated by Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of their own: British Women Novelist* (1977, 1982) she says: “Victorian feminine novelists thus found themselves in a double bind. They felt humiliated by the condescension of male critics” (p. 538) female authors’ writings were ‘inferiorized’ and were not treated as genuine writings that make the female authors suffer from “anxiety of authorship” according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar: “‘anxiety of authorship’ – a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (p. 2027).

The daughter who signifies the female author tries to please her father by trying to obey his request even though she says that she doesn’t remember that she used to write in that way; this shows that the father doesn’t listen to his daughter. The narrator as an author and critic of literature believes that writing in linear structure doesn’t suit her because it takes all hope from the humans’ life, and she believes that everyone deserves an open destiny in life. Again this manifests the difference between the female author and her male counterpart. Similarly, this brings to the mind the questions that were raised by Gilbert and Gubar which ask about the meaning of being a female author in patriarchal society. The two authors question whether the female author has a chance to express herself by using her own voice and by avoiding imitating male’s voice, could she stand the criticism of patriarchal society, or is she doomed to follow the male author’s steps without having a chance to express her real self and her genuine feelings.

Virginia Woolf, indeed, turned to use the stream of consciousness as technique in her novels. It is “the technique that records the multifarious thoughts and feelings of a character without regard to logical argument or narrative sequence” (“Stream Consciousness”) This technique reflects the inner self of the character at a certain moment “The technique was first employed by Édouard Dujardin (1861–1949) in his novel *Les Lauriers Sont Coupés* (1888) and was subsequently used by such notable writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner” (“Stream Consciousness”). The stream consciousness was a modern technique in Woolf’s time hence as a female author this technique gave her a space to express herself. In that case the need for a new style and techniques was an urgent demand for the female authors.

Grace Paley the author of *A Conversation with My Father* was born in (1922-2007). She belongs to the third generation of authors according to the division that Elaine Showalter. She postulates that the first generation around the year (1840) suffered from the harsh criticism by patriarchal critics and they expressed their inferiority and self hatred in their writing. In a like manner, the second generation of Victorian women writers, born between 1880 and 1900 tended to self-expression but that reflected self-hatred and retreated more and more toward a separatist literature of inner space. While in the 1960s, the third generation of female authors who was influenced by the international women’s movement entered a new dynamic phase that she called the renaissance in women’s writings. They expressed women’s view of life and women’s experience in creative sense.

Paley felt the need to try to experiment using new styles, yet she felt that the linear style doesn’t give her hope and doesn’t allow her to express herself. Unlike her, the father is an old man who is suffering from heart diseases. The author says that her father was a doctor and an artist for a couple of decades which shows his influence by the traditional male authors and his inability to avoid their influence. Symbolically he represents the exhausted male authors who are suffering from the “anxiety of influence” as was explained

by Harold Bloom, and later by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who used this theory not only to identify the patriarchal competitive and aggressive psychosexual context in which much Western literature was authored, but also because it helped to distinguish the creativity of female authors from those of male authors. Gilbert and Gubar say:

The separation of female subculture has been exhilarating for women. In recent years, for instance, while male writers seem increasingly to have felt exhausted by the need for revisionism which Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence' accurately describes, Women writers have seen themselves as pioneers in creativity so intense that their male counterparts have probably not experienced its long since the Renaissance, or at least since Romantic era. The son of many fathers, today's male writer feels hopelessly belated; the daughter of too few mothers, today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging. (p. 2028)

The daughter, as a young female author, feels that she has a chance to create literature of her own without suffering from influence, since male authors write in different ways and their themes, style, technique, and images don't resemble hers. "Men and women do use language in different ways; they have different kinds of sentences. Women speak in a sexual distinctive way from men" (Humm, 1986, p. 7). The narrator tries to obey the father and writes using style that doesn't leave a chance for her character; she goes against her taste and she tries to do so. The narrator starts her story by using the technique that is used in children stories she says: "Once in my time" (Paley, p. 2). In the nineteenth Century, around (1840), the first generation of female authors as Showalter shows were trying to satisfy the patriarchal society by writing in a way that competes for satisfaction rather than confronting the values of their society, their writing sounded sentimental rather than genuine. Grace Paley reflects this issue by the use of the fairy tale technique that shows the dilemma of women when they write to satisfy their society rather than expressing their genuine self. Maggie Humm (1986) in her book *Feminist Criticism* says: "How women wrote is how they were allowed to write" (p. 7); writing with fear of the other paralyzed women's authorship in a patriarchal society.

The narrator tells her father a story about a woman who lived with her son who became a junkie, in order not to lose her son the woman turned to be a junkie too. Later on, the son leaves his mother in grief and leaves the town. The hopeless woman stays alone by herself and the neighbors visit her. This story disappoints the father who once more compares it to the stories written by Chekhov and Turgenev. He believes that the story is plain. Indeed, Paley represents the ordeal of women as explained by Bradstreet: "Do badly and you will be mocked but do well and your authorship will be denied" (qtd. in Plain and Sellers, p. 33). At this level, the narrator and her father have a different understanding about literature, style and characters. The main character in this story is a female character; the father demanded a physical description for this woman while the daughter did not see the need for that detail. In comparison, the father didn't require any physical description for the son, he says: "Her looks for instance . . . Her hair?" (Paley, p. 2). Clearly then, each of them deals with women differently as a subject/object binary.

Women suffered from the negative stereotypes that were forced upon them by the patriarchal literature that used to tell them how to look and how to act, and if any of them differ from the standard then she will be accused of not being feminine; according to Monique Wittig's *One is Not Born a Woman*: "And those who resisted it were accused of not being 'real' women" (p. 2016). The female subject has to resemble the expectation of the male society. Simon De Beauvoir explains in her book *The Second Sex* that: "Mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided

for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the later that are wrong: we are told not that femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine” (p. 1407).

The father wonders whether the female subject in the story was married or not, and he feels upset when the narrator tells him that the son was born out of wedlock. The narrator believes that her character is smart, while the father tells her she was good looking but not smart. Treating the female subject as a body that should be beautiful and belongs to the criteria of the innocent house wife keeps torturing women especially in the nineteenth century. Gilbert and Gubar say: “The fact that ‘infection in the sentence breeds’ suggests Dickinson’s recognition that literary texts are coercive, imprisoning, fever-inducing; that, since literature usurps a reader’s interiority, it is an invasion of privacy [...] which perpetually tell her how she seems” (p. 2030). Moreover, the father’s stress on the marriage theme reflecting the conflict between him and his daughter on the gender issue, the gender is: “In every society there are prescribed roles for men and women and this has been discussed variously in the literature as gender role specifications. Over the years, however, these roles have changed and attitude towards the roles have also changed. Different factors account for these changes which may depend largely on both personal and societal factors” (Nagoshi, 2012) the female narrator saw her female character as a smart person because she was deconstructing the gender role, the father subject was absent in her story and the female subject was taking care of her son without the need for male support.

The narrator believes that she has to give a space for her characters, until she as a narrator reaches to an agreement with the stubborn character, she says: “Well, you just have to let the story lie around till some agreement can be reached between you and the stubborn character” (Paley, p. 3) which contradicts the father’s point of view who believes that the author should control the course of events. The male author practices his authority on the female subject and shapes her life the way he wants. Later on, the father requests from his author to rewrite her story because what she wrote in the first place didn’t fit with his masculine point of view.

The narrator starts all over again by adding the details that were recommended by the father but still the narrator can’t avoid writing as a female because of the details and the descriptions that she uses to describe the love of the mother to her son; motherhood is the feeling that only a mother could talk about: “She had a son whom she loved because she’d known him since birth ‘in helpless chubby infancy. And in the wrestling, hugging ages, seven to ten, as well as earlier and later” (Paley, p. 3); this space which was given in a short story for the details of the mother’s love shows how women write in a passionate way. In *Feminist Criticism* the author Maggie Humm (1986) says:

An even more important task for feminist criticism, then- more important than re-evaluating women’s writing, or re-evaluating the misrepresentation of women’s intellect-is to re-evaluate the whole terrain of criticism itself as mapped out and colonized by men; that is, to change the language of literary criticism from one of power and possession to one of emotion and caring (p. 6).

Being emotional and passionate is not considered a weak point any more; the female authors in the modern ages started to feel proud of their bodies, motherhood, emotions and femininity. And they want to create their own theories that suit their vision.

Examining the author’s life is an important task according to new historicism. Accordingly, the author can’t be separated from his environment, as he is a product of his culture “The human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in particular society” (qtd. in Abrams, p. 221) Therefore,

it is essential to go back to Grace Paley's life, especially that she is narrating the story from the first person's point. The author Grace Paley is a feminist author who wrote about the daily life of working women and she is well known for her realistic language that borrows from real events ("Grace Paley"). She lived in the sixties in the time of human rights movement; hence she chose to write about a mother who lived in the sixties. Being a female she can't separate literature from real life; she needs to explore the social, political and economical circumstances that surround the female in patriarchal society. Furthermore, one of the assumptions of feminism is: "that literature and criticism is ideological since writing manipulates gender for symbolic purposes. The experience of gender in writing and reading is symbolized in style, and style, therefore, must represent the articulation of ideology [...] Ideology is our way of coping with contradiction of experience" (Humm, 1986, p. 6).

The narrator tells a story about a real woman who lives in the author's neighborhood. "Many early modern women writers, discontented with the representation of women in imaginative texts by men, adopted a creative alternative to a negative attack on the stereotypes of men's writing: they formed new female character types of their own" (Plain and Sellers, p. 34). Modern feminists owe the political movement a great deal for this purpose separating the feminist literature from the political thought is not possible. The sixties period is the years that changed the American society socially and politically. At that time society was changing radically people were demanding racial equality, sexiest equality and they were against the Vietnam War. The young Americans were angry and they protested against the violence, inequality, injustice and oppression.

According to Webster's dictionary a "hippy" is: "a young person of the 1960's who rejected established social mores, advocated spontaneity, free expression of love and the expansion of consciousness, often wore long hair and unconventional clothes, and used psychedelic drugs". The hippy movement is a countercultural movement that rejected the established norms of mainstream American life. Students were the first to originate this movement on college campuses in the United States (Stone, p. 1). The son in the short story becomes a hippy; this attitude is accompanied by becoming addicted to drugs. The mother instead of standing against her son she becomes a junkie too. She acts out of love and fear of losing her son "and because she always believed in giving bad habits room at home where one could keep an eye on them" (Paley, p. 4). The mother's attitude wasn't because she was convinced about righteousness of the moral values of the movement, but rather she was motivated by motherhood. Skip Stone says in his book *Hippies from A to Z* that "hippies seek to change the world through reason and by living what they believe." This principle contradicts the mother's attitude; she didn't become a hippy out of rational belief but rather because of her emotional concern about her son. In light of this, by deconstructing the structure of the story the different attitudes of the father and the mother become manifested. The father keeps urging his daughter to change the style of her writings while the mother in the story doesn't hesitate to change the whole style of her life for the sake of her son. The father doesn't know his daughter very well while the mother adopts her son's habits. The contradicting action between the mother and the father appear through deconstructing their behavior.

The role of the mother and father is a socially constructed concept; it is a gender issue as explained in *Critical Theory Today* "because caregiving, especially caregiving to infants and young children, has been labeled a female instinct, it is difficult for many of us to consider it in any other light" (Tyson, p. 109). Therefore, motherhood and fatherhood don't contrast with each other but society makes each of these concepts become

contradictory. Linda Brannon concludes, in a research that was conducted to examine the gender differences, “research on gender differences in responsiveness to babies has shown differences in self-reports, but not in psychological measures, of responses to babies [...] girls and women show more responsiveness to babies because they believe they should, and...boys and men show less responsive for the same reasons” (qtd. in Tyson, p. 110). Hence the mother’s emotional reaction towards her son is doubled by social construction, while the father’s true belief that he should be obeyed comes from the culture that demands the obedience of the father. “The concept of maternal instinct has no support as a biologically based explanation for caregiving, and both men and women have similarly emotions related to nurturing” (qtd. in Tyson, p. 110). Again, Grace Paley insists on reflecting the social gender role by describing how the mother’s kitchen becomes famous for a while as a center “for intellectual addicts who knew what they were doing” (Paley, p. 4). This ironic sentence shows the contradiction between those intellectual who knew what they were doing and between the mother who was motivated by her emotions. In addition to that, the author shows the differences between gender roles when she used the word kitchen in relation to the mother. Grace Paley criticizes the reduction of woman’s role into a serving the male ego.

On the other hand the junkie son falls in love with a young lady who appreciates his writings. Grace Paley describes how this young boy starts to appreciate his masculine features and how he appreciates his muscles: “In fact he began to love them, treasure them, [and] praise them” (Paley, p. 4). This young strong boy decides to move forward in his life, and he decides to stop using drugs. Pursuing this further, he asks his mother to quit taking drugs as simple as that he leaves her alone and moves with his girl to another place. He also tells his mother that he would not see her until she stops using drugs for sixty days. After all what his mother did for him in order not to lose him, he just walks away and leaves his addicted mother without giving care for her. Again when comparing the son’s attitude to the daughter’s attitude the difference becomes clear. The daughter sets by the side of her sick father and tells him stories while the son leaves his addicted mother to face her destiny all by herself. The gender roles are not biological but rather a social issue that differs from one culture to the other. Culture plays a great role in determining the position of the male and the female functional role in society.

The mother in the story was left alone the neighbors come to conceal here. The destiny of this woman is an arena for conflict between the father and his daughter each of them see her future from his own perspective. Hayden White says “The same set of events can serve as component of story that is tragic or comic” (p. 1715). The mother’s story could be treated as tragic story depending on the perspective from which it is seen. According to H. White the historical events are neutral and what changes their value is ‘the emplotment’ that is the way in which these events was encoded in a certain story. Women suffered from male’s unjust representation of them in their literature. The mad woman, the angel woman, and the mysterious woman were images that were imposed on women from male perspective. These images were neutral images but the way they were exploited by men to reduce women into stereotypes is what harmed women.

The father says “as a writer that’s your main trouble. You don’t want to recognize it. Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end” (Paley, p. 6). The patriarchal society that condemns women’s liberation, this society assesses the mother’s addiction and then her abandonment by her son as a tragedy. The father thinks that she has

no hope being born in the era of freedom quest; he sees her without a character. Besides that, he believes that a woman should have someone to support her otherwise she'll suffer because of her inability to face life all by herself. The daughter gives hope to her character and she proves how her productive power was an essential part in improving the economy of the society "The head doctor has said to her, 'if we only had three people in this clinic with your experiences...'" (Paley, p. 6). Moreover, the father's comment about his daughter's writing reduces it to a mere joke. He finds her vivid story as a plain story. He doesn't appreciate the character and his daughter's writing. The father says: "Number one: You have a nice sense of humor. Number Two: I see you can't tell a plain story. So don't waste time ... What a tragedy. The end of a person" (Paley, pp. 5-6).

On the contrary, the daughter refused to surrender to her father's opinion. She wanted to save that woman from that dark end. As an author from the third generation she wanted to free women as literary subjects from the oppressive patriarchy. Being a modern author she didn't consider the age of the woman as an obstacle, rather she found that her experience as a junkie is "better than having a master in education" for her the experience that is taught by life is what makes a woman able to face life. "That woman lives across the street. She's my knowledge and my invention. I'm sorry for her, I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying" (Paley, p. 6). The author resists the tragic end, she belongs to the modern generation of female authors who write in a realistic manner about real women, and they don't hesitate to deal with taboos and with women's complicated issue. No matter how much she insisted her father kept refusing to accept to offer this woman a happy life. The author is convinced that this independent woman could have a new life and by working she could protect herself and become an independent woman.

At the end, by deconstructing the characters into signifiers, a new meaning comes out. Grace Paley writes a story that's at surface value treated as generation gap, but by digging deep in the story and by deconstructing the signifiers into another signifier, a new meaning emerges. Grace Paley's story is full of images that could be deconstructed over and over and each time it surprises the reader with its rich ideas. *A Conversation with my Father* is a story about a conversation that shows the conflict between females' understanding of life and literature in contrast to males' understanding. This conversation shows the difficulty of communication especially as long as one of the parties is using his authority to subjugate the other. The father demands obedience all through the story. The daughter as a liberal modern female author doesn't stand to write in a way that doesn't express her real feminine self. In addition, she refuses to condemn her protagonist of eternal suffering and a tragic lonely end. On the contrary, she believes in her protagonist's potential that could go on in her life, and she proves that there is no obstacle as long as the female will resist surrendering to the tradition that restricts her creativity. Grace Paley's story is a great example of the feminist creativity and her writings prove that the female authors are qualified and that no one could stop their distinguished achievements.

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