

RESPONSES TO STEREOTYPES OF SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN WOMEN'S SHORT FICTION

by

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Society has consistently constructed and stereotyped women's sexuality by encouraging certain sexual behaviors. These standards apply to women of all races, classes and sexual orientations. Upper-middle class white women are considered to be passive and non-sexual, while African-American women face stereotypes of over-aggressive sexuality. Lesbian women often see attitudes which consider lesbian sex insignificant in comparison to heterosexual sex.

Through literature, women writers have the ability to respond to such sexual stereotypes. Specifically, American writers Ellen Gilchrist, Alice Walker, and Dorothy Allison use their short fiction to demonstrate how women are affected by society's standards. Gilchrist depicts a Southern culture which emphasizes appearances and women's sexual repression. Walker explores the way stereotypes which objectify black women affect their sensuality while Allison examines the lack of discourse concerning lesbian women's sexuality.

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INTRODUCTION

Establishing the Issue: Examining stereotypes which influence women's sexuality

Throughout the last century, women's literature has had a gradual yet constant impact on the male-dominated literary canon. Each piece of women's literature is as unique as the woman who writes it, both in style as well as content. However, many works by women address subjects which are often avoided by American society and considered inappropriate to discuss in the public sphere. These works include references to violence against women, subjugation of female thought and action, and women's sexuality. Although many issues in women's literature are worthy of attention, sexuality in particular strikes a significant chord in all readers because of its personal nature. Women's sexuality has come to play a major role in feminist theory because both individuals and societal institutions restrict female sexual expression. Thus, literature about women's sexuality often invokes feelings of astonishment and disdain in addition to liberation and encouragement.

A woman reading about female sexuality can be empowered if she has long been taught to quell her own sexuality. The more she opens herself to the being aware of the sensuality of being a woman, the more she can face the beautiful workings of her body without fear or shame. Therefore, women's literature which addresses sexuality often enables female readers to understand themselves and their feelings. Unfortunately, however, many people and institutions of American society still see women's sexuality through veils of confusion and scorn.

People have come to make certain assumptions about female sexuality, and if a woman does not live up to these assumptions she is often seen in a negative light. These assumptions include the idea that women's sexuality should be

repressed and that women should be sexually submissive to men. Recent works of American women's short fiction display female sexuality in ways which challenge the stereotypes established by society while exploring the sexual expectations and practices of women in white middle class culture as well as in various groups considered marginal by American society. Specifically, Ellen Gilchrist discusses the sexuality of Southern white women in her short story collection, *The Age of Miracles*, while Alice Walker examines stereotypes of black women in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, and Dorothy Allison considers the impact of sexual construction on lesbian women in *Trash*. Although the stereotypes for each culture vary, the writers all demonstrate how their characters are affected by sexual standards which make a distinct impression on their choices and behaviors.

These cultural differences mean that women have varying standards to deal with, but traditional stereotypes of sexuality largely involve women's passivity and submissiveness. Critic Ann Oakley states, "The female's sexuality is supposed to lie in her receptiveness and this is not just a matter of her open vagina: it extends to the whole structure of feminine personality as dependent, passive, unaggressive and submissive" (36). Since physiologically, in heterosexual sex, a woman receives a man's penis, he seems the giver and she seems the receiver. Therefore, as Oakley claims, the woman's personality should supposedly be constructed to be non-assertive in response to her sexual role.

Stevi Jackson also argues that "Within our own society women are assumed to be sexually passive and in general less sexual than men" (63). Jackson attributes this role to the socialization of feminine and masculine behavior. She explains how sexuality has been constructed throughout a person's life: "Sexual learning does not happen all at once with no reference to previous experience, but the aspect of pre-adolescent development that has greatest relevance for sexuality is the learning of gender roles" (68). As children grow up, they receive societal

messages which teach them how to behave specifically as men or women. Jackson explains that girls' learned behavior includes a focus on romance and dependence, since, "A girl has nothing to gain and her 'reputation' to lose if she is too sexually active" (72). This fear of losing a reputation sets up a double standard which accepts male sexuality while condemning female's. It also teaches girls that they may need to repress their own desires in order to be socially accepted.

Lucile Duberman echoes Oakley's and Jackson's ideas in her book *Gender, Sex and Society*. She comments on the social construction of sexuality as behavior learned by the time of adolescence and comes to the same conclusion as Jackson: "Females are trained to be romantic and nonsexual; males, to be sexually active and nonromantic" (53). Furthermore, Duberman explains how this attitude of learned sexual behavior continues into females' adult lives. She asserts that the theme of male dominance "stresses sexuality as pleasurable for men and obligatory for women. It is based on the assumption that males have stronger innate sex drives than women, and that, in this as in all other areas of life, women should be passive and receptive and men should be aggressive" (47). The feared 'reputation' of girlhood becomes a restraint on the actual sexual activity of womanhood.

Duberman also comments on ideas of biological determinism, a scientific perspective researched by many psychologists which subscribes to the belief that physical differences between men and women govern their personality traits: "These scientists believe that women are 'naturally' subordinate to men. . . they accept femininity--that is, passivity, subjectivity, sensitivity, intuitiveness, dependency and emotionality" (33). Biological determinists claim that this is the way all women should behave because "These traits are biologically derived, and attempts to change them cannot succeed" (33). This attitude of biological determinism perpetuates the repression of female sexuality by claiming that human behaviors have biological validation and therefore, if a woman does not comply

with these ideals, something is wrong with her. Duberman describes how a sexually active woman's behavior is perceived: "She is suspected of being a whore, a nymphomaniac, oversexed and insatiable" (232). Biological determinism thus adds to the standard of 'acceptable' sexual behavior for women and reprimands the woman who does not comply.

In their book, *Feminism and Sexuality--a Reader*, Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott explain the ways feminists attempt to break down learned sexual barriers. In their introduction, they explain the importance of addressing questions of sexual assumptions, reminding us:

Historically, enormous efforts, from chastity belts to property laws, have been made to control female sexuality. . . . The double standard of morality has entitled men to sexual freedoms denied to women. It has also divided women themselves into two categories: the respectable madonna and the rebarbative whore. Women's sexuality has been policed and regulated in a way which men's has not. . . . Women have also been vulnerable to male sexual violence and coercion, yet held responsible for both their own and their assailants' behavior. (3)

Jackson and Scott emphasize how women's sexuality has been controlled, standardized, and repressed. They acknowledge the limitations society places on female sexuality and recognize the histories of male power over women. Feminists have recently been able to reclaim their sexuality as a positive aspect of their lives, as Scott and Jackson mention: "Feminists continued to attack the double standard, to challenge the view that sexuality was bad for women and that only 'bad' women were sexual. They began to demand the right to define their own sexuality" (5). Feminists confront the patriarchal standards which place them in a position of sexual subordination.

Scott and Jackson's book includes a variety of commentaries on women's sexuality. Many of these works aim to change opinions of normative sexual practices. Anne Koedt's classic article, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,"

specifically gives a new perspective on the ways women's sexual satisfaction has been seen as an accompaniment to men's. She states that many people believe that women achieve orgasm through the same act as men, and this therefore defines women's pleasure only in terms of its relationship to men's. She begins her article by making a statement which contradicts typical sexual thought: "Actually, the vagina is not a highly sensitive area and is not constructed to achieve orgasm. It is the clitoris which is the centre of sexual sensitivity" (111). This statement is significant because it challenges the conventions of heterosexual sex and reminds us that "Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men" (112). Koedt comments on why this is detrimental to women: "perhaps one of the most infuriating and damaging results of this whole charade has been that women who were perfectly healthy sexually were taught that they were not" (114). This idea that healthy women were considered abnormal coincides with the processes of social construction and again places emphasis on the constricting behaviors and attitudes that society has taught women.

Critic Amber Hollibaugh analyzes the destructiveness of these standards on a woman's pleasure and natural desire. She encourages women to discuss their innate sexuality instead of repress it, but she acknowledges the lessons concerning the avoidance of female sexuality: "From birth we have all been taught our lessons well. Sexuality is dangerous" (224). Hollibaugh's passionate writing encourages women to explore their own erotic desires. She asserts that we cannot break from the social construction we have learned until we allow ourselves the freedom to acknowledge our personal desires. She reminds us that "We live terrified that other people will discover our secret sexual desires" (227).

Hollibaugh's article continues to explain how we, as women, can claim the power of our sexuality. She invites us to take the chance to be sexual: "We can begin to reclaim our rights to fight, to experiment, to demand knowledge and

education about sex" (228). She addresses the roots of such powerlessness in women's sexual lives: "We seem to have decided that power in sex is male, because it leads to dominance and submission. . . Much of our theorizing has suggested that any arousal from power felt by women is simply false consciousness" (228). The reclamation of desire that Hollibaugh encourages manifests itself in so many of our activities. It can be found not only in our sexual activity and attitudes, but also in our speech, our art, and our literature. These avenues of expression provide a way for women to examine their sexuality as well as the institutions and ideals which have influenced it.

Hollibaugh not only encourages us to explore and express our sexuality, she also recognizes the implications of our differences as women: "We live out our class, race and sex preferences within our desire and map out unique passions through our varied histories" (226). Although all American women have dealt with the implications of a socially constructed sexuality which emphasizes repression, our cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds also shape our attitudes towards sexuality. She asserts that the key is recognizing our differences and validating our power however separate we may be from the norms of society: "Feminism cannot be the new voice of morality and virtue, leaving behind everyone whose class, race and desires never fit comfortably into a straight, white, male (or female) world" (229). Most of the passive stereotypes defined for women focus on the white middle class, which tends to be epitomized in Southern society. Critic Margaret Jones Bolsterli states: "The roles of women and men have traditionally been more clearly defined in the South than in any other region of America" (7). Women's sexual passivity is therefore more encouraged in the South than in other parts of the country. Mary A. McCay describes this position: "The woman, dependent on the man for her livelihood, happiness and social

position, must woo him without seeming to woo and, through marriage, secure for herself a place in society" (x-xi).

This standard of submission so apparent in the Southern white woman, is not assumed for non-white women, though it may be encouraged. African-American women in particular deal with the stereotype of being exotic, oversexed, and sexually 'loose'. bell hooks examines this stereotype in her work "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood." hooks argues that the supersexualization of black women dates back to slavery: "The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system. . . . they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages" (217). hooks explains that this stereotype not only devalues black women, but threatens their safety as well since "In sexist terms, a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal, cannot be raped" (217). Furthermore, because of this stereotype, black women's experience with rape draws little attention, as hooks explains, "All through American history, black male rape of white women has attracted much more attention and is seen as much more significant than rape of black women" (217). Therefore, the issue of a black woman's definition of sexuality is not the same as a white woman's. In addition to expectations of chastity and assumptions of promiscuity, she must also deal with society's devaluation of her body.

Black women automatically acquire the negative designation that a sexually active white woman receives - whore, slut, nymphomaniac - though the black woman may not be sexually active at all. hooks claims that:

So pervasive was the tendency of whites to regard all black women as sexually loose and unworthy of respect that their achievements were ignored. Even if an individual black female became a lawyer, doctor or teacher, she was likely to be labeled a whore or prostitute by whites. (220)

Examining the source of these assumptions in her article, "Hearts of Darkness," Barbara Omolade outlines the historical oppression of black women and, like hooks, discusses the devaluation of black women's bodies. She comments on the attitudes of white men towards black women during slavery: "The social arrangement assumed the black woman to be without any human right to control her own body" (355). Apart from the "loose" stereotype of the black woman, Omolade does not overlook the oppressions of sex, apart from color, that black women face: "Even after the end of slavery when the white patriarch receded, maleness and femaleness continued to be defined by patriarchal structures, with black men declaring wardship over black women" (361). Thus, black women deal with both the assumption of looseness from whites, and the oppression of their personal desires by men.

Omolade also analyzes the attempts of black women performers of the early twentieth century to gain control over their own bodies. Ironically, their lifestyles seemed to perpetuate the stereotypes of loose black women:

These black women lived lives of explicit sexuality and erotic excitement with both men and women. As they broke away from the traditional paternal restraints within the black community, they were castigated for seeming to reflect the truth of the white men's view of black women as whorish and loose. (362)

Though these women were showing strength in their deviation from patriarchal structures and expectations, they were reprimanded by their communities for encouraging a stereotype which still exists today.

However, in her article, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime," critic Hazel Carby explains how these black women musicians positively reclaimed their sexuality. Instead of portraying their sexuality as forbidden and only in relation to male desire, women blues musicians, through their songs, displayed, "female

sexual autonomy" (754), and considered the blues "the exercise of power and control over sexuality" (757). Also, Carby comments on their physical presence: "All the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire" (756). Therefore, though their actions may have been interpreted as reinforcing a negative stereotype, they were actually reclaiming what was negative into a positive celebration of their bodies and rebelling against the standards set up for them by both the black community and America as a whole. Likewise, black women writers often use their literature to recapture control and celebration of their own sexuality.

Patricia Hill Collins's essay, "Black Women and the Sex/Gender Hierarchy" demonstrates how the devaluation of black women has been depicted in pornography. Collins recalls hooks's description of black women as sexual savages: "In contemporary pornography women are objectified through being portrayed as pieces of meat, as sexual animals awaiting conquest" (308). She gives an example of this portrayal when she claims that "African - American women are usually depicted in a situation of bondage and slavery" (309). Such situations of bondage and slavery construct an image that says that black women are always willing to comply to whoever may be controlling them. This consistent devaluation of the black woman still has implications in today's society. Collins emphasizes this: "All Black women are affected by the widespread controlling image that African-American women are sexually promiscuous, potential prostitutes" (311). Black women's literature today tackles these stereotypes as it addresses issues of sexuality and femininity in the black community.

Lesbian women also feel the impact of a constructed sexuality. Although for the most part, society expects women to be heterosexual, many people have specific ideas of lesbian sexuality as well. However, these ideas tend to vary. Men

tend to perceive lesbians either as a turn-on or as a disgusting threat to their masculinity. Society in general often views lesbians either as too sexual or completely non-sexual. Sexual politics also play a factor when people view lesbianism as a direct political statement against patriarchy.

Diane Richardson's article, "Constructing Lesbian Sexuality" touches on all of these standards and stereotypes. The first question Richardson raises is the issue of defining "sex." Since society generally defines sex as a penis inside a vagina, Richardson comments that lesbian sex is not considered to carry the same importance as heterosexual sex. In fact, Richardson comments, "Lesbian sex has often been conceptualized as immature, not as satisfying as intercourse, second-best sex" (278). When people wonder what lesbians do for sex, Richardson interprets this to mean, "without a penis what can you do!" (280). Therefore, the presence of lesbian sex in literature can often dispel myths of lack of arousal and satisfaction. Also, since lesbian sex is often not considered "real" sex, it tends to be overlooked in society as a whole, and literature can help to explain some of society's confusions about the actualities of lesbian sex.

Richardson also comments on the dichotomy of lesbians being oversexualized and being desexualized. She reminds us that lesbians, as well as gay men, are, "a social group defined by its sexuality" (280). Also, since women are generally viewed as passive sexually, Richardson comments, "The allocation of sexual agency to lesbians is, however, congruent with the view of the lesbian as unlike real women in her interests and desires and, to varying extents, more like a man, where men's interest in sex largely goes unquestioned" (280). Because people often view men as more sexual than women, when they attribute male qualities to lesbians, they consider them in a highly sexual context. She continues to comment that this stereotype leads to another common conception about lesbian sex--that it mimics heterosexual sex: "The notion that lesbian sex necessarily

involves 'role-playing', that one woman plays the part of the 'man' and the other the part of the 'woman', is also widely believed by some people, including lesbians" (280). These constructed images of lesbian sexuality create stereotypes which emphasize the sexual but not the emotional aspects of lesbian relationships.

At the other extreme, Richardson suggests that lesbians can also be desexualized, as though their rejection of men is also a rejection of sexuality. She discusses that the notions of the sexually passive female lead to an absence of sexuality in a relationship with two women: "For if to the predominantly male 'experts' what lesbians do isn't real sex, then it's perhaps not altogether surprising that studies of lesbian relationships have often focused on emotional attachment rather than sexual behavior" (281). Two other factors have contributed to the desexualized image of lesbians. One, "the knowledge that sex between women is often interpreted as a 'turn-on' for men, as the pornography industry can easily testify" (276). The repeated images of two women having sex in pornography often encourages lesbians to draw attention away from their sexuality. Two, "within the feminist movement which, especially in the early days, resulted in some lesbians experiencing a pressure to downplay their sexuality to avoid giving 'feminism a bad name' or scaring off heterosexual women" (276).

In her article, "Lesbian Sex," Marilyn Frye discusses people's notions and definitions of sex in relation to a survey on couples which examines sexual frequency in relationships, both in a couple's own relationship as well as what they perceive of other's relationships. She comments, "These people apparently found that lesbian couples 'have sex' far less frequently than any other type of couple, that lesbian couples are less "sexual" as couples and as individuals than anyone else" (110). Whereas at first Frye does not see this as a great variant from her perceptions, she continues to find it problematic in defining accurate sexual

behavior. Through further examination, she realizes that what is defined as sex for heterosexual couples "is not the same thing" (110) for lesbian couples.

What most people consider "sex" generally has to do with male penetration and ejaculation. For this reason, it is difficult to count how many "times" a lesbian couple has sex. Frye points out this dichotomy: "I think that if the heterosexual women counted 'times' according to the standard meaning of 'have sex' in English, they counted not according to their own experience of orgasm or even arousal, but according to their partners' orgasms and ejaculations" (112). This is important because it demonstrates that whereas people think that heterosexual couples have more sex than lesbians, they only define sex as it relates to male orgasm.

Frye also examines the lack of language for lesbian sexual activity, and how that raises difficulties in defining actual behavior: "This has been particularly important to lesbians because the very fact of 'sex' being a phallogentric term has made it especially difficult to get across the idea that lesbians are not, for lack of a penis between us, making do with feeble and partial and pathetic half-satisfactions" (116). Since lesbians do not define their sexuality the same way that heterosexual women do, their sexuality has often been considered less significant as well as less prominent in their relationships.

Frye does see a solution to this misunderstanding and misrepresentation of female sexuality, both lesbian and heterosexual: "Instead of starting with a point (a point in the life of a body unlike our own) and trying to make meanings along vectors from that point, we would do better to start with a wide field of our passions and bodily pleasures and make meanings that weave a web across it" (117). She asks us to reexamine our sexuality as it applies to our own desires, not the presence of a penis. She also encourages sexual discourse between women to eliminate the confusion of defining our sexuality. Frye recognizes that such discourse has often been discouraged among women in our society, and asks that

we break away from that constraint: "The vocabulary will arise among us, of course, only if we talk with each other about what we're doing and why, and what it feels like" (118). Literature can play an important role in this discourse because it encourages discussion and definition when it addresses issues of sexuality and lesbianism.

For many people, lesbianism is not just defined as who a woman sleeps with, but also as a political statement. Richardson comments that this too, desexualizes lesbianism by considering it in terms of its politics instead of its personal aspects. She mentions that many lesbians do not agree with that notion: "Their concern was that lesbianism was becoming associated with a critique/rejection of heterosexuality and feelings of sisterhood for other women, rather than a positive and sexual attraction to women" (283). According to Richardson, politicizing lesbianism detracted from the actual experience of loving a woman.

Critic Cheryl Clarke points out an important issue that many of us may forget when discussing stereotypes of lesbian sexuality and politics: "There is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship" (156). Despite the preconceived notions our society holds about lesbian sexuality, and female sexuality in general, we must remember that sexuality is as diverse as the entire population of women. Lesbian literature can be a perfect reminder of that diversity, as well as an avenue to comment on the stereotypes which surround lesbian sexuality.

CHAPTER ONE

Defying Passivity: Ellen Gilchrist's depiction of Southern women's response to standards of sexuality

Ellen Gilchrist's numerous stories examine Southern white women's responses to societal expectations. Gilchrist's characters often display rebellion against standards, but they also demonstrate how their behaviors have been influenced by what they believe they should be. Gilchrist is not afraid to explore a woman's fears and insecurities. As critic Margaret Jones Bolsterli states, "She is willing to go deeper into personality, to shine a light into the dark corners of women's souls to expose the preoccupations that get in the way of their achieving wholeness and coherence" (7). The preoccupations which Bolsterli addresses are often reflections of the expectations of women's roles in southern American society. In Gilchrist's latest collection of stories, *The Age of Miracles*, four stories, "Love of My Life," "Going to Join the Poets," "Joyce," and "A Statue of Aphrodite" examine women's views and feelings surrounding their sexual expectations and personal desires.

Bolsterli expands on these roles of southern white society, stating, "Little boys are encouraged to pursue activities that will prepare them for running the world while little girls are restricted to the domestic arena where they are expected to spend the rest of their lives" (8). Even further, Bolsterli comments on "the fascination that this women's sphere holds for little girls" (8). Many of Gilchrist's characters embrace the roles laid out for them, and, in turn, find themselves feeling inadequate or bored as they grow older. Often, the women turn to their sexuality to remedy their sense of insufficiency.

In the case of Rhoda Manning, one of Gilchrist's recurring characters, her sexuality not only reflects itself in terms of her behavior with others, but also in

her views of herself. Rhoda displays anorexic tendencies in many of the stories, and her obsession with her appearance becomes an issue of sexuality by becoming a preoccupation of her own sexual presentation. Rhoda walks the line between conforming to society's ideals and rebelling against them. Critic Tonya Stremlau Johnson comments on Rhoda: "Rhoda . . . likes to see herself in the role of rebel . . . yet she never seems to be able to break the strong ties of family and society which bind her to the past" (87). Furthermore, "Obsession with appearance is the most visible way Rhoda shows that she has been successfully socialized" (88).

In "Love of My Life," Rhoda begins by discussing why she does not eat: "If I am beautiful, the thing I want will show up" (215). Rhoda uses dieting to achieve a model of beauty that she believes will lead her to satisfaction in life. She believes that fulfilling the standard of female appearance will bring her love, and love will fill the voids in her life. Strangely enough, Rhoda does not consider herself fat; she does see her thinness and believes that it attracts men and therefore will bring her love. Being thin gives her a sense of power. She says, "Well, surely they will want me. I am so pretty" (218).

Aside from Rhoda's physical obsessions, this story focuses on Rhoda's encounter with Raine, a young man with whom she falls in love, believing that he is what she has been looking for. She considers him "my one true love, the Indian man, the man who was my equal, who was good enough for me" (219). The equality Rhoda talks about demonstrates that she knows she is sexually desirable and that she can be selective about who she is with. She sees herself as fulfilling the stereotype of the ideal Southern woman. However, she believes that most men do not deserve her because she is so thin and pretty, not because she is a unique person. Rhoda also thrives on male attention. She says, "I wanted plenty of admirers" (220). These admirers verify her worth as a woman. Therefore she sees

her power in her sexual attraction and ability to draw men to her, reflecting how she has been influenced by stereotypes which value a woman's appearance over her intellect. Through Rhoda's focus on her weight and beauty, Gilchrist responds to the influence of physical attractiveness to men in defining a woman's sexuality.

The depiction of Rhoda's relationship with Raine focuses on her feelings while she is with him. Gilchrist eloquently portrays a sensuality that relates to Frye's discussion of sexuality where women tend to refer to all of their senses during sex, not merely the single act of penetration. Gilchrist also discusses sexuality with a subtlety that avoids detailing specific sexual acts. When Rhoda reflects upon the relationship, she says, "I remember him saying that he loved me. I remember the way he smelled. The next day my skin smelt of him" (224). She also describes, "Perhaps all we did that day was go downtown to a hotel and make love until the sun went down" (225). Gilchrist's avoidance in describing Rhoda's lovemaking possibly demonstrates Gilchrist's reluctance to venture too far outside the realms of the acceptable. It draws attention to the emotional aspects of sex instead of the physical and erotic. This could be a reflection of the stereotype which holds that white women view sex with emotion instead of physical gratification.

Gilchrist's subtlety demonstrates how a woman's focus tends not to be on the act of penetration, but more on the senses surrounding sexuality. This focus also reflects the stereotype that women are more emotional than men and pay less attention to actual sexual activity in favor of the way it makes them feel. Rhoda comments, "I could never remember making love to him. We would enter a room and our bodies would meld" (226). She expands on this feeling, and how their love, for her, meant so much more than its physical manifestation: "Because of him I know what books and stories mean when men and women love each other

without stint or question, in defiance of order, in defiance of self-interest or knowledge or pain. Sex was only part of it" (227).

As Rhoda's relationship with Raine continues, she begins to see a different purpose in it. Gilchrist brings up feelings of consumption, and how sex can be used to take away pieces of another person. Rhoda's own insecurities come out in her sexuality. Sex becomes the avenue for self-fulfillment, though it often falls short: "We beat upon each other's body, taking all the pleasure we could, giving nothing away, taking, taking, taking" (232). She explains that "There is only one love like that, one white hot moment when a man and a woman ask everything of each other, ask sacrifice and pain and dishonesty. . . . My body pulling on him to empty him and make him suffer" (233). Gilchrist demonstrates how the intimacy of sex exposes vulnerabilities in a person which can be painful.

Rhoda discusses Raine in a manner which demonstrates how she needs him to make herself feel complete; how she takes from him when she is feeling inadequate: "It would be nine years before I needed him again. Before I called and told him to come save me" (233). At the end of the story, Rhoda reflects on the manipulative tendencies in her relationship with Raine. She recognizes how the consumption of another person becomes detrimental to her sense of well-being by placing her lover's needs before her own: "I pity lovers, caught in that consumption... When nature takes us back which we call love" (235). Her love for Raine consumed her so much that she defined her sense of worth through his affection, as women have often been constructed to define their lives in relation to men.

Furthermore, she believes that this consumption, not desire, explains why women have sex with men: "Why else down all these centuries have women lain down with men and died in childbirth?... It has nothing to do with freedom, tenderness, pity, love... these are words we invented to forgive ourselves" (236).

This attitude of consumption demonstrates how women know that they can use their sexuality to make a man vulnerable, and encourage him to be attached to her. It also shows a woman's sense of obligation to the man she loves by subjecting herself to his desires without considering her own needs for tenderness and freedom. This sense of obligation reflects Duberman's comments about the ways women are expected to look at sex as more of a duty than a pleasure.

"Going to Join the Poets" continues to explore aspects of Rhoda's relationship with Raine, but it also demonstrates how Rhoda learns to empower herself through her writing and encounters with other people. The sexuality described in this story tends to be less sensual than in "Love of My Life" and less of a focus throughout the story. Also, the way Rhoda refers to sexuality tends to be with a hint of bitterness. She no longer views lovemaking with the idealism she did when she first met Raine. Her constant references to "fucking" demonstrate a lack of sensitivity and sensuality when it comes to sex.

The first paragraph of the story discusses the failings of her marriage to Eric and her disillusionment: "She wouldn't have a child for Eric and he wouldn't fuck her anymore. Not that sex between them had ever made either of them happy. It had always been a tortured, patched-up affair. Because they didn't love each other" (239). Here Rhoda recognizes the role of love in a sexual relationship. She also brings up the influence of society's expectations when she talks about bearing children. She does not want to have more children, which seems to be a main reason for the problems in their marriage and their sexual relationship, as well as what drove them apart.

Rhoda holds Eric partially responsible for her sporadic relationship with Raine as well as her need to get away from her children and explore her literary talents. She says, "It's Eric's fault, goddammit. He shouldn't have stopped fucking me" (241). They stopped having sex because she did not want to have another

child, and Rhoda uses this as the reason she turns to Raine. Her sense of obligation to Eric makes her bitter against him, which demonstrates how she is affected by society's expectations that women be both wife and mother. Rhoda yearns for a way to break away from the roles she has played for most of her life. She believes that having an affair can be a way to separate herself from her duties as a wife.

However, she finds herself disillusioned with Raine as well. When she calls him to drive her to Arkansas to study writing, she says, "I do not love him anymore but I will fuck him before I use him as a chauffeur" (242). In the next paragraph she draws a parallel between herself and Raine's other lovers when she says they passed "towns where he had fucked every other cheerleader" (243). Here she is using her sexuality to get things she wants, and takes something from someone because she knows she can. She no longer views Raine with the innocence and infatuation she did when she first met him.

The idea that she can obtain something through her sexuality comes up again when she meets the people in her literature class. She says of one good-looking man, "He's the one I'll fuck... If I can get him" (245). This also demonstrates how she views men as an object or commodity, much how the society stereotypically portrays women. This man becomes a prize for Rhoda, a challenge which she strives to achieve. However, when she finds out he is married, she says, "So Rhoda gave up on him and fucked a fiction writer instead" (248). In this story, Rhoda does not discuss the pleasures of sex. She does not explain her reasons for wanting to have sex, but she treats it as somewhat of a game. This abrupt discussion of intercourse reflects the lack of significance or lack of emotion that sex now has in Rhoda's life, which contradicts stereotypes because it demonstrates that women are not always emotional about their sexuality.

This sentiment is further explored in a brief story of Gilchrist's, "Joyce." Rhoda is again the protagonist of the story, but the story is told in the third person. Gilchrist explains the relationship Rhoda has with the fiction writer and examines the reasons Rhoda has sex with this man: "They made love out of curiosity and greed, without passion or tenderness or joy. They made love to prove they were mean enough to do it" (164). She explains how this affects both people: "As the semester wore on, they became thinner and meaner" (165). Again, Gilchrist explains how sex can expose vulnerabilities and thus detract from the fullness of a person. It also demonstrates how sex can lose its excitement when it is used for the purpose of taking away pieces of a person.

This relationship seems to be an exploration of Rhoda's sexuality, and how she values her abilities. As the affair continues, "She was bored with fucking Ketch on Wednesday nights. It was so cold, so pointless" (165). This realization helps Rhoda to recognize that obtaining sex from men does not necessarily make her happy, nor is it a satisfactory way to define her worth. As Rhoda begins to realize her own worthiness outside of her appearance and her sexuality, she explores her talents as a writer and eventually values herself more as a person.

Rhoda starts to recognize her intellectual value in her first reference to sex in "Going to Join the Poets" that does not involve "fucking." It comes when a close friend of hers dies. He was a brilliant and famous poet, and although they had never been involved romantically, they had been very close emotionally. Rhoda considers this closeness as much more important than sex, which again demonstrates her disillusionment with sex, as well as her attention towards other aspects of her self: "All the women who made love to him, who held him in the sleepless dark nights of his soul, had never had what she had from him" (247). She recognizes here that sex is not the most important part of her life, nor does it satisfy her longings. She also begins to remove focus from her weight issues as

she explores her writing, perhaps reflecting this recognition of value beyond her sexuality.

As Rhoda becomes more involved in her writing, she discovers a part of herself that makes her more willing to try to save her marriage to Eric. She goes back to New Orleans to visit him and her son, and she "awkwardly made love to her husband" (255). He says, "'We will start again'" (255), and from here Rhoda begins to figure out what she needs from herself. She still sees sex as somewhat of a commodity. For example, when Eric is good to Teddy, her son, she says, "He was rewarded. She took him into the bedroom and made love to him" (256).

By the end of the story, Rhoda talks about the importance of her own work, and how she must develop herself in order to be able to give to Eric. She tells him, "'I have to have my turn. I never had a turn, Eric. All I had were babies'" (260). In order to love Eric, she must draw her own sense of value away from her sexuality and child-bearing capabilities. This reflects a stereotype of white women's sexuality which includes the idea that sex is mainly for the purpose of reproduction. It also demonstrates how Rhoda's sense of self worth starts with physical attractiveness and child-bearing ability before she allows herself to value her mind apart from her body.

The focus on child-bearing refers to Bolsterli's discussion of how Southern society has specific ideals about the roles of women. When Rhoda separates her sense of value as a person from her sense of value as a body, she begins to rebel against the stereotypes which have constructed her sexuality and her lifestyle. "Going to Join the Poets" explores Rhoda's transitional feelings in terms of how she values herself and her sexuality.

Rhoda continues to value her intellectual abilities, and as she matures, learns to delight in her sexuality. The first story in Gilchrist's anthology, "A Statue of Aphrodite," depicts Rhoda's character much older than the young woman she is

in the last two stories of the book. Rhoda has been a writer for several years and is stronger in herself as an individual, as well more in touch with her sexuality. She views sexuality with some casualness but significantly less bitterness than when she was younger. Sex in this story is fun and familiar instead of selfish and bitter. Rhoda opens with the line, "In nineteen eighty-six I was going through a drought" (3).

Rhoda begins to see a change in the weather when she receives letters from a doctor named Carter Brevard who lives in Atlanta, while she is living in Jackson, Mississippi. She attributes this attraction to her writing, saying, "If you fall in love with the words on the page, you are hooked" (5). For Rhoda, this is significant because it marks a distinct difference in how she values herself. Previously, she had been so concerned with her weight and appearance that she would not have considered her intelligence to be the point of attraction for a man. However, she does have some relapses of the weight obsession she had when she was younger. When the Carter sends her a dress, she, "Had to starve myself morning, night, and noon" (12) to get into it. Fortunately, she does not dwell on this as she did earlier, and quickly forgets her weight issues as she prepares for her trip.

The preparations for the visit with the doctor include elements of fantasy, also missing from "Going to the Poets." She is able to reflect on the joys of sexuality, jokingly saying: "I guess I could afford eight thousand dollars to remember how nice it is to come" (5). Even further, she exclaims as she thinks about the coming visit: "Oh life, oh joy, oh, fecund and beautiful old world, oh sexy, sexy world" (11). She also finds joy in the small things, like when the doctor gives her a hug, she says, "When you haven't been laid in fourteen months and a reasonably good-looking doctor who makes at least two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year hugs you by the elevator, you don't forget it" (10). These exclamations demonstrate Rhoda's change from a bitter sexuality to a joyful one.

They also show Rhoda's comfort expressing her sexuality, which breaks from stereotypes which consider women's sexuality a taboo topic of conversation.

Rhoda also acknowledges her own desires in this story. This acknowledgment breaks sexual stereotypes which do not expect women to be thinking so frequently about sex. She refers to her thoughts the days before her visit as "mind-fucking" (10), and her fantasies reflect a kind of assertiveness that manifests itself when she spends time with Carter. This ability to be in touch with her sexuality demonstrates how Rhoda has drawn attention away from what she can get out of people and instead focuses on her own personal pleasure. She seems to reclaim the desire that Hollibaugh mentions by allowing herself the pleasure of being sexual.

Rhoda's sexual activity with Carter is largely self-motivated, though not selfish. She dispels stereotypes by concentrating more on her own pleasure than on his, and unlike "Going to the Poets," she does not try to take from him in order to make herself feel better. This concentration also allows her to be more forward with what she wants. When she arrives at his place, she says, "'Aren't you going to sleep with me?'" (14). Although Carter is unable to perform sexually himself, Rhoda is more concerned about what he can do for her. When she says, "In maybe two minutes he made me have an incredible orgasm and he had done it with his fingers" (15), she is not only pointing out her own desires but also dispelling the stereotype that sex, to be pleasurable, must involve penetration. In this story, Rhoda is not afraid to talk about sex, saying, "I woke up in a really good mood. An orgasm is an orgasm and its a hell of a lot better than Xanax" (15). This story brings up points which will be found in Walker's writing which assert a woman's power to be sexual and enjoy her own sexuality.

These stories demonstrate how Gilchrist views sexuality as a kind of continuum, recognizing how women's attitudes towards sex can change with their

lives. This varies from the standard stereotype of white women's sexuality which claims that women are consistently passively sexual in response to men.

Gilchrist's Rhoda changes her sexual attitudes based on her feelings, and what occurs in her life, not in reaction to the men she is with. By writing stories about so many phases of Rhoda's life, Gilchrist successfully depicts the contours of a woman's changing sexuality, covering themes of selfishness and bitterness as well as innocence and playfulness.

CHAPTER TWO

Examining the Self: Black women's reactions to objectification and desire in Alice Walker's short fiction

Literature plays an important role in the destruction of stereotypes surrounding black women. Not only can women use their writing to tear down societal standards, they can also write to examine their own multifaceted sexualities. Critic Nellie McKay asserts that, actually, black women have never been silent about their experience. On the contrary, society has not listened. She says, "History assures us that black women have not ever been artistically or critically silent, even though for most of the past their voices went largely ignored by those who did not wish to hear them" (251).

Now that black female literature is gradually gaining more attention from the general American public, we can see how these women have been screaming for recognition behind the stereotypes. McKay also reminds us that "It is important to note that the efforts to reverse the negative images of black women in literature began as early as these women began to find an opportunity to write" (251). Since slave narratives, black women have been looking to dispel the stereotypes surrounding them.

McKay also recognizes the importance of realism in black women's literature: "There is little effort to conceal the pain, and just as little to create the ideal, but a great deal to reveal how black women incorporate the negative and positive aspects of self and external reality into an identity that enables them to meet the challenges of the world in which they must live" (259). McKay's statement could easily be a specific description of Alice Walker's work. Walker writes with an authenticity which does not attempt to gloss over the realities of life. Three of the short stories in her collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman*

Down: "The Lover," "Coming Apart," and "Porn," discuss sexuality. In these stories, she does not depict sexuality with romantic ideals, nor does she deny the difficulties of being a sexually active black woman. Alice Walker's stories examine the diverse sexualities of black women and the ways in which they relate to their lovers through the constrictions placed upon them by society.

Hazel Carby comments on the difficulties of writing about sexuality as a black woman: "These writers faced a very real contradiction for they felt they would publicly compromise themselves if they acknowledged their sexuality and sensuality within a racist sexual discourse thus providing evidence that indeed they were primitive and exotic creatures" (749). However, Walker seems to ignore this complication. She writes to discuss intimacy, uninhibited by the fear of encouraging society's stereotypes.

Walker adeptly dives into the psyches of her characters, examining their true sexual and personal feelings. As Mary Helen Washington writes, "we can see a conscious effort by Walker to explore the imaginings, dreams, and rituals of the subconscious of black women which contains their accumulated collective reality" (38). Again, she reveals the truth about her characters' experiences, and without these "imaginings, dreams, and rituals," her stories would not be able to display such truth. Washington also comments that Walker writes about "the woman suspended, artist thwarted and hindered in her desires to create" (41). By examining the complete and unfiltered feelings of black women, Walker's literature succeeds in giving life to the thwarted artist and allowing creation to occur beyond society's hindrances.

Michael Cooke agrees with Washington but goes further to assert that Walker is a positive example of the ways in which intimacy, which includes sexual intimacy, has played a recent role in black literature. He begins by saying, "In recent years intimacy has established itself as an important if not a dominant

modality in black literature" (140). Thus he recognizes that to ignore sexuality would be to give an incomplete description of life and in turn perpetuate the silences enforced upon women. Cooke places Walker in this context by explaining, "It is Walker who illumines the inner struggle and public cost of genuine intimacy, and who unmasks the varieties of false intimacy among us" (140). In truth, each of these three stories recognizes the implications of sexuality on women's personal lives as well as on social and political attitudes and perceptions.

In "The Lover," Walker examines the excitement of sexual exploration and the rediscovery of personal sensuality when taking the risk of loving outside of a marriage. The narrator in this story takes a lover partly because she lacked sensuality in her marriage and partly because she enjoyed the exciting idea of having a lover. She begins by describing the dullness of her marriage. As the story progresses, she consistently awakens to her erotic senses until she finds herself completely aware of the passions she has forgotten about in her married years. By the end of the story, she is able to redirect her passions towards her husband.

The story begins almost depressingly as the narrator explains the sexual void in her marriage surrounding the birth of her child:

Her husband had wanted a child and so she gave him one as a gift. Still, it had taken a lot out of her, especially in the area of sexual response. She had never been particularly passionate with him, not even during the early years of their marriage; it was more a matter of being sexually comfortable. After the birth of the child she simply never thought of him sexually at all. She supposed their marriage was better than most, even so. (31)

At this point, it seems as though the narrator fits into the standards of non-sexual women, which is mostly expected of white women but also encouraged in black women. The introduction also echoes the idea that women, including black

women, have passive sexualities and have sex only as a means of reproduction to satisfy their husbands' wishes. Although her marriage lacks erotic intimacy, the narrator still views it as a good marriage because of comfort. Her choice to have a child reflects her admiration for her husband as well as her sense of duty. This sense of duty relates to the expectation that all women, black and white, should obey their male partners. She does not feel a need for sexual stimulation, but recognizes a sex-related void in her life.

However, Walker quickly sheds this notion of a non-sensual womanly nature as she allows her narrator to rediscover her passions in the arms of a new lover. Her arousal begins gradually as she turns herself on to Ellis's charms by watching his motions and thinking of the way he would feel, especially his hands: "She wondered if they would be as sensitive on her skin as they looked" (34). She shows how she recognizes her own lack of sexual excitement in her life: "She also responded to his curly hair and slim, almost nonexistent hips, in a surprisingly passionate way" (34). These awakenings demonstrate that women are susceptible to sensuality and have erotic desires that society generally assumes though discourages in black women and accepts in men.

When the narrator describes her actual affair with Ellis, her depiction of sexuality rests largely on the need and excitement of the romance and the feeling of being sexual again, instead of the pleasure of the sexual activity itself: "When they made love she was disappointed... But it hardly mattered, since what mattered was the fact of having a lover" (37). This depiction puts an interesting twist on female sexuality, since this narrator does not fit the stereotype of the passive white woman, nor does she fit the stereotype of the aggressive black woman, instead she embodies a woman with a largely emotional and intellectual desire that is satisfied through the passions of being in a new sexual relationship. This desire is important to her because it makes her aware of her own emotions and senses: "She

enjoyed feeling to her full capacity and for as long as possible the excitement having a lover brought. It was the kind of excitement she'd felt years ago... and she recognized it as a feeling to be enjoyed for all it was worth" (37). These feelings, be they physical or emotional or both, become a new definition of sexual need which combines the fascination of the mind with the joys of the flesh in a new perspective. Walker describes this mixture: "Her body felt on fire, her heart jumped in her breast, her pulse raced--she was aware, for the first time in years, of actually *needing* to make love" (37).

The excitement of the affair does not necessarily center on Ellis, as much as it does the idea of Ellis. She uses Ellis to explore her own marriage and reawaken her senses both in her personal life and in her marriage. When he complains that she is too involved in their affair, she responds, "That she wanted nothing from him beyond the sensation of being in love itself" (37). At the end of the story, she is able to redirect these feelings to her husband while still maintaining the exciting quality of the affair which keeps her connected to her desires. She does this by dreaming: "At night, after a rousing but unsatisfactory evening with Ellis, she dreamed of her husband making love to her on the kitchen floor at home... and lay in bed next day dreaming of all the faraway countries, daring adventures, passionate lovers still to be found" (39). This dream allows her to keep with her the pleasure and the thrill of the affair while remaining married. It also reminds her of her passionate feelings and allows her to access them in order to provide excitement in her life.

Walker's "Coming Apart" serves a dual purpose in its criticism of pornography. It describes the implications pornography can have on a marriage, while pointing out the differences between the porn industry's treatment of white women and black women. The story was written as part of a book about pornography, and draws on the works of Audre Lorde, Luisah Teish and Tracy A.

Gardner. In it, a black woman examines her feelings about her husband's use of pornography of both black and white pornography. Then, in her discovery of Lorde, Teish and Gardner, she reevaluates her marriage and comes to redefine herself with a newfound empowerment.

First, Walker looks at the emotions the woman in the story feels when she discovers her husband's pornography of white women. This view examines the insecurities a woman often has surrounding her partner's use of pornography, and the fears she sees in her own sexual relationships. The wife introduces this by describing her reaction: "Will he be thinking of them, she wonders, when he is making love to me" (43). This is significant because it shows a woman's apprehensions concerning sexual attractiveness, and it displays how women often see their sexuality as it relates to men. It also shows how black women fear that their husbands are more attracted to white women than they are to them, and they define their sex lives in terms of their male partner's needs and desires.

"Coming Apart" also brings up crucial points about the differences between the pornography which exploits black women and that which exploits white women. The first image the woman sees depicts black women as inhuman. She sees a black woman, "twisted and contorted in such a way that her head is not even visible... so that she looks like a human turd at the man's feet" (43). She describes the images she sees on a street in New York where life-sized sex dolls depict a black woman in a complete leopard suit. Through her study she realizes that "Where white women are depicted in pornography as 'objects,' black women are depicted as animals" (52). This emphasizes the stereotype that bell hooks discusses in which black women are considered sexually aggressive in a savage fashion.

The woman first removes sex from the realm of pornography when she introduces an anecdote about her mother which exhibits her ideas about female

sexuality. She expresses surprise about her mother's continuous sexual desire when she says her mother "loves sex" (45). The narrator would like to believe that a sexy woman is one who maintains a desire for sex and responds to her lover as well as her own sexual needs. However, she realizes the implications pornography and society have had on men and herself when she also explains, "Her husband would not consider her mother sexy, she thinks" (45). This narrator recognizes that men often define a sexy woman as one who is youthful and light-skinned, posing for them and enticing them. Again, this addresses issues of female sexual insecurity because the wife worries that her husband will not continue to find her sexy because she does not fulfill the image in his magazines, and as she grows older that image will fade even more. This demonstrates how stereotypes have affected this woman's definition of sexy and her comfort with her own sexuality.

As the wife begins to look at the articles which speak against pornography, she comes to realize the influence her husband's habits have had on her own sexuality as well as their sexual relationship. He feels challenged by her exploration of women's feelings and her interest in the essays which condemn pornography. When he says, "he feels somehow as if her struggle to change the pleasure he has enjoyed is a violation of his rights" (46), he demonstrates how he has viewed their sexual life in terms of himself and his own desires.

He responds to this with defensiveness because he knows that his own habits have been compromised by his wife's understanding of the influence of pornography. He attacks her as "a woman's libber," (48) because he cannot comprehend her desire to empower herself. He then starts to separate the woman he makes love to from the images he sees in a magazine. As his wife points out the problems with pornography and their sex life, he realizes that "to make love to his wife as she really is, as who she really is--indeed, to make love to any other human being as they really are--will require a soul-rending look into himself" (51).

Here, he recognizes that making love is not only about what a woman can do to satisfy a man.

He reinforces this by saying that "he does not know how to make love without the fantasies fed to him by movies and magazines" (53). Because the wife knows this, she leaves him for some time to let each of them reevaluate their sexuality. This story demonstrates pornography's influence on a relationship and women's insecurities surrounding male desire. In "Coming Apart" the woman grows because she comes to a point where she can define her sexuality as an individual instead of in relation to her husband's pornography.

Another of Walker's stories, "Porn," also reflects the implications of pornography on a relationship. It depicts an affair between a black man and a black woman which is largely based on sexual compatibility. The narrator is a woman who describes her sexual desire erotically and without restraint, much against the standards of women's submissiveness, though in accordance with the sexual empowerment described by Carby. Walker is similar to black women musicians in this story by depicting a woman who is open with her sexuality and falls into the stereotypes of a sexual black woman. However, it also examines how pornography can have an affect on women that differs from its affect on men and can even alter the comfort level in a relationship.

The narrator describes an affair which fulfills her sexual needs and puts her in touch with her desire: "Sex together was incredibly good. . . . She was aflame with desire for him" (78). This is significant because it demonstrates how she contradicts standards of female sexuality which tend to place women in a role which does not focus on desire. This narrator is not submissive, nor does she deny her true feelings of sexuality because she thinks society will not accept them.

While this relationship has a mainly sexual focus, it is a focus which grants respect to both persons involved and assumes that the woman's needs are equal to

the man's. However, when he introduces the issue of pornography, the affair becomes unbalanced. When she becomes acquainted with his collection, she has difficulty understanding its desirable quality. While making love, she cannot erase the feelings of sexual objectivity that arise when she observes his porn. One critic comments, "she is distracted by her inability to fantasize and he by concern for where her mind is; and their bodies are literally unable to contain one another" (Naylor, 85). What he sees as exciting she views as "sleazy: depressing" (83).

Her reaction to his pornography demonstrates a distinct incompatibility in an otherwise seemingly perfect sexual match. He notices that "There seems to be a separate activity in her body, to which she is attentive, and which is not connected to the current he is sending" (83). He recognizes that the pornography he has introduced into the affair has become a stake driven through the middle of them. His fantasies are not her fantasies.

"Porn" emphasizes ways in which men can think that what turns them on will turn their partners on. It demonstrates that pornography may not be as exciting to women as it may be to men, and because pornography generally caters to men's needs and desires, this story shows that what caters to men does not necessarily cater to women. "Porn" shows that even in an actual individual relationship, men could expect women to desire things which relate solely to men's fantasies. This expectation demonstrates how pornography has perpetuated harmful stereotypes of female sexuality. In addition, the definition of the woman's sexuality is crucial because it shows that her rejection of pornography is not a rejection of sexuality, merely a rejection of the way it is depicted. She rejects pornography because it does not fit into her sensuality, not because she rejects sex.

Walker's stories succeed in examining the significance of sexuality in the lives of black women. She explores the influence of sexual standards while accurately describing women's true feelings and experiences. She portrays women

who celebrate their personal sexuality as well as women who see their sexuality only as it relates to men. This dual portrayal is a reflection of the many influences on black women, including the idea that they are encouraged to be passive, but expected to be aggressive. Walker's characters also display women who ignore standards enough to be able to enjoy the pleasure of their own sexuality.

CHAPTER THREE

Redefining Discourse: Dorothy Allison's contributions to the acceptance of lesbian women's emotions and sensuality

In her collection of short stories, *Trash*, Dorothy Allison addresses issues of sexuality and the role her writing has played in interpreting her experiences. Allison's experience as a survivor of incest and rape adds to her motivation to write. She explains, "Writing it all down was purging" (9). Her stories became a place for her to understand the things that had happened to her and explore her own desires and needs. In an interview, Allison explains, "Writing became the way that I could say things that otherwise I had no other way to talk about" (74). These stories include terrifying tales of incest as well as erotic descriptions of lesbian lovemaking. Allison's discussion of lesbian sexuality adds to the lesbian discourse which Frye asks for in "Lesbian Sex." This collection is an example of the ways women can become more comfortable with the discussion of lesbian sexuality.

In four of her stories, "Monkeybites," "Demon Lover," "Her Thighs," and "A Lesbian Appetite," Allison dispels sexual stereotypes about lesbians by depicting sexually charged relationships which do not focus on heterosexual penetration. She does not adhere to standards which consider women sexually submissive, although she does address situations where those stereotypes affect women. She describes the various feelings present in sexual relationships, including emotional closeness, obligation, rebellion, guilt, and excitement.

"Monkeybites" describes how sex can become a means to connect with someone, but can also be a substitution for true emotion: sex is the easy part of the relationship, or what two people can do when one of them cannot deal with emotional attachment. Sex becomes the excuse to be close to someone without

acknowledging a desire for emotional intimacy. The narrator in the story wants to believe that she does not need to be loved, and her partner, Toni, attempts to convince her that she is fooling herself. Allison dispels sexual stereotypes in this story by displaying a sexual relationship between two women that is overtly erotic, as opposed to the notion that women are sexually passive. In this story, Allison describes how her narrator uses sex to make herself feel emotionally satisfied. It demonstrates the healing elements of sex, as well as sexual entrapment. Such entrapment can be a response to the tendency women have to use sex as a way to make their partners feel happy.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator explains this obligatory sentiment, as well as feelings of being caged. The narrator works in a biology lab with monkeys, and uses them as a metaphor throughout the story. Sometimes she feels her lover's arms, "around me like the wires that trussed the monkeys" (87). These feelings of entrapment relate to her feelings of obligation and guilt by demonstrating that she is afraid to open herself up to her emotions. For the narrator, making someone else happy meets her needs, even if the pleasure is the other person's. Like Gilchrist using Rhoda to explain why women have sex out of duty, Allison reacts to the stereotype of obligation by demonstrating women's tendency to put another person before herself. She explains, "I rarely came making love to Toni, but nothing made me feel so balanced as an hour or two pushing my tongue between her swollen labia. It was expiation and penance. It was redemption" (88). Sex becomes for the narrator the means to relieve herself of guilt through another person's freedom, though she does not receive physical pleasure herself.

When the narrator does allow herself the joy of sexual satisfaction, she almost can not deal with the emotional connection, and attempts to deny her feelings: "I jerked and pushed against her, wanting to fight" (90). When she is

sexually satisfied, she becomes emotional, finally getting in touch with the feelings she has been trying to repress: "I began to cry the deepest aching sobs. It felt as if my skin itself were trying to absorb her" (90). By feeling as if she is trying to consume her lover, the narrator takes away from Toni instead of relishing what they can give each other. This again is similar to Rhoda by recognizing ways in which sex exposes people's vulnerabilities, allowing their partners to be able to cause them pain.

Allison's narrator also at times talks about women's sexuality as a commodity, which relates to ways in which the media and society depict women as objects and passive receptors of sexuality. When she says, "all I want of Toni is just a little piece now and then" (95), she reinforces male-focused viewpoints of female sexuality as "pieces" of something that can be bought, sold, or traded, instead of connected to a real human being with thoughts and emotions. Throughout the story, the narrator seems to feel that sex becomes an act which is only about taking away from someone else either through gaining redemption or gaining pleasure, instead of about pleasure and desire. It becomes selfish and exhausting, without regard to emotion.

When the narrator thinks about trusting Toni, she says, "A kind of terror came up from my belly and strangled me" (93). Somehow, by only having sex with Toni and not becoming emotionally involved, she is able to keep her distance, and save herself from attachment. She also explains, "I don't want to need her at all" (95). Perhaps for the narrator, sex distances her emotions by focusing mainly on the basic physical needs of the relationship. Toni recognizes this fear when she says, "You tell yourself it's just sex, and sex an't nothing but itch-scratching. You tell yourself lies, girl" (93). Toni knows that the narrator uses sex to satisfy her need for love. This story dispels the stereotype that lesbians are nonsexual, and that women are sexually passive. "Monkeybites" acknowledges how women can

use sex to separate themselves from their feelings and depicts obligation and eroticism, thus adding to the lesbian discourse Frye asks for by discussing the varieties of emotions and acts involved in sexuality instead of focusing on penetration.

In "Demon Lover," Allison again addresses issues of possession and emotion in a sexual relationship but focuses more on closeness instead of distance, both with the lover as well as the self. This story is a haunting tale of a lover, Katy, who has died, and the way the narrator wants to recapture the feelings they shared together. In her dreams, the narrator comes to grips with her own desire and need for Katy's love. Her memory becomes so real that she believes Katy is truly with her, making love to her. In "Demon Lover," Allison shows how sexuality is a way to keep in touch with the memory of someone lost. It also demonstrates a distinct need to possess something that we feel we cannot have, as well as reflects a rebelliousness against societal taboos of active female sexuality.

The narrator of "Demon Lover" consistently refers to the ways in which her living relationship with Katy depicted a danger and secrecy, which in turn became exciting. This could be a response to the notion that women should not be overtly sexual because the idea of rebellion excited both women. It also could demonstrate that women feel the need to hide their sexuality in the fear that others will look down on them and give them a "reputation". The narrator recalls instances in which the two women made love in secret, and Katy told her, "Don't make no noise. They'll hear" (112), in hopes that they can keep their affair quiet. The narrator reflects on the excitement of this secrecy: "It was the worst sex and the best, the most dangerous and absolutely the most satisfying" (113). This element of danger becomes erotic in the women's defiance against passive standards of women's sexuality.

The narrator also describes how Katy encourages such rebellion in her. Katy brings out the narrator's desires even when she feels she must fight them. She first mentions this when she says that Katy would rebel against standards because she mischievously "would mostly do whatever she swore solemnly she would not" (111). Katy was not afraid to explore various realms of her sexuality although she felt she should refrain initially. Going against her word meant that Katy exhibited a rebelliousness that conflicts with society's standards of passive female sexuality. The narrator also responds to this conflict with the way she 'should' be and the way she wants to be. When she fantasizes about being with Katy after she died, she says, "It feels so good. It feels so awful" (115). This contradiction demonstrates how the narrator is torn between the pleasure of sex and the shame of believing that she should not let herself feel good about making love to a ghost.

Throughout "Demon Lover," the narrator expresses a feeling of possession, a yearning to consume Katy through sexuality, as though making love to her will bring her back to life. At the same time, Allison's portrayal of Katy also depicts a desire to own someone. Thus, this story displays how sexuality can manifest a woman's need for ownership of a person she loves, which reflects back to Rhoda's contemplation of consumption. The opening line of the story shows Katy's need: "Katy always said she wanted to be the Demon Lover, the one we desire even when we know it is not us she wants, but our souls" (111).

The narrator seems to respond to Katy's possessive feelings by displaying her own need to possess Katy: "She is the vampire curse in my life. You have to invite them back, and part of me always wants her, even when most of me doesn't. Right now all of me wants her, flesh and blood, body and soul" (115). The narrator even believes that if she wants her badly enough, Katy will come back to love her again. She asks, "Will we be lovers again? Is she real enough this

moment to put her filmy body along my too-tight muscles?" (115). These questions show how the narrator yearns for the physical closeness she shared with her lover, and how that physical closeness reflects an emotional bond that is missing from her life since Katy has been gone.

As the story progresses, the feelings of possession grow more intense. The narrator seems to abandon the restraint that she uses to protect herself against the pain of missing Katy and wants to give herself completely to the idea that she can bring Katy back through the recollection of their sexual relationship. She says, "I pull myself back down and lie still, giving it up. . . I want to swallow her, all of her. . . . She could melt into my bones. We could be the same creature" (116). These feelings demonstrate how sex often carries with it senses of possession and a need to be a part of the lover.

Unfortunately, the narrator realizes that sex is not enough to bring Katy back to life, just as sex is not enough to possess another person. She says, "But I cannot get ahold of her. My very movements seem to push her up and away" (116). "Demon Lover" then becomes a story which reflects the intensities of being sexually close to someone and wanting to possess them. It demonstrates how people believe that sexuality can be a means to reclaim someone who is lost and responds to standards which assert the need for women to be secretive about their sexuality. By expressing these emotions, "Demon Lover" becomes another important element in lesbian discourse.

"Her Thighs" encourages further discourse by specifically addressing how women are affected by societal taboos about sexuality. It discusses a relationship in which the narrator's lover, Bobby, is bothered by the intensity of both women's sexuality, responding to the standards which say that women should not be as sexual as men. It also illustrates roles which women feel they should play and the fear women have of their own sexuality. Bobby's feelings that women should

conform to a certain expectation present themselves in the beginning of the story when the narrator says: "The woman was as profoundly uncomfortable with my sexual desire as my determined independence" (120). This demonstrates how Bobby was influenced by the notion that women should not be sexual nor independent.

Because Bobby "believed that lust was a trashy lower-class impulse" (119), she denied her own feelings of desire, thus conforming to the repression of female sexuality that is expected by society. Allison embellishes this idea when she says, "Oh, Bobby loved to fuck me... but it bothered her that we both enjoyed it so much" (119). Bobby had clearly been taught that her own sexuality was something to be ashamed of, and that being sexual would reduce her to a lower class position. That shame led to the destruction of their relationship because Bobby could not come to face her own sexuality, nor the sexuality of her partner.

Although Bobby could not accept this female desire, she allowed herself to succumb to it in her dark bedroom: "Only in that darkness would Bobby let herself open to passion" (120). When the narrator does arouse Bobby's passions outside of the bedroom, she believes that marks the place where Bobby can no longer deal with the intensity of the relationship, as though acknowledging her own desires is too frightening. When the narrator seduces her outside the bedroom, she says, "I knew absolutely that I was in control" (121).

However, "it was control at a cost, of course, or I would be there still" (121). Bobby's loss of control to her lover made her flee from the relationship, thus conforming to the standard that white women tend to believe about their own sexuality: they should not be so intensely sexual, or something is wrong with them. The narrator comments on this: "I was the uncivilized thing in Bobby's life. . . . reminding her of the taste of hunger. . . her own desire. I became sex for her"

(121-2). This uncivilized aspect of sex was what Bobby was afraid of, and marks her own sexual repression.

The narrator comments on how Bobby ended the relationship: "That was so long ago and far away, but not so far as she finally ran when she could not stand it anymore, when the lust I made her feel got too wild, too uncivilized, too dangerous" (122). Because Bobby could not accept her own sexuality, she reflects how women are influenced by the restrictions of society's taboos. The narrator also realizes that Bobby was afraid of the narrator for, "What I am" (122), and thus acknowledges that society's standard of sexual repression denies women their true desires and asks women to be someone they are not. "Her Thighs" therefore represents an acknowledgment of the ways women react in their relationships to the standards of society, and serves as a criticism of the ways society has constructed female sexuality.

Allison's most famed story, "A Lesbian Appetite" is a perfect addition to the discourse Marilyn Frye yearns for because it celebrates lesbian sexuality and relates desire to hunger while recognizing the varieties of emotions women feel in their relationships. By associating the narrator's sexual relationships with food, she makes the reader aware of the distinct variations of love and sex. "A Lesbian Appetite" acknowledges the sensual aspects of sexuality by comparing sex to the sense of taste, and writing about a multitude of tastes and emotions. Comparing sex to food also brings up feelings of consumption, as in some of Allison's earlier stories. The narrator recalls times when lovers not only hunger for each other but also seem to eat away at each other. The descriptions of pleasure and satisfaction in this piece depict the varieties of senses involved in both food and sex.

Allison relates food to sex in terms of sustenance, as sex to her represents a basic need. The narrator says, "I've only had one lover who didn't want to eat at all. We didn't last long" (151). This lover's lack of hunger for food probably was

interpreted by the narrator as a lack of sexual desire. More than just nourishment, however, food also becomes a powerful memory for her, and a way to hold on to past lovers after they had left. She says, "Food is more than sustenance; it is history. I remember women by what we ate together, what they dug out of the freezer after we'd made love for hours" (151). Remembering her lover's tastes in food make her celebrate the lovers themselves, and the combination of both of their sexualities.

The narrator discusses one particular lover, Lee, with whom she remembers teasing through constant references to food. When Lee says, "I'll cook you a meal to drive you crazy" (155), she is making a distinct sexual innuendo that acknowledges both of their desires and sensualities by comparing their sexual sense to their sense of taste. Allison also draws a distinct difference between herself and Gilchrist here because her narrator sees food as attractive, whereas Rhoda sees the absence of food as attractive. This could be a reflection of the fact that Allison is not trying to please men and does not feel pressured to comply to their standards of attractiveness.

A different lover, Jay, reacts in the opposite way from Lee. In a relatively violent scene, Jay repeatedly says, "Swallow it" (157), as though she is forcing the narrator to contain her, and when she says, "Gonna bathe you . . . Eat you for dinner" (158), it is as though she wants to eat away at her self. This scene involves no actual food, but its references to eating give it a distinct tone of consumption, a swallowing up of her being. This segment relates more to Gilchrist because it discusses the vulnerabilities of sex and ability to consume someone through sexuality, as Rhoda examines in her relationship with Raine.

The story continues to make several comments about food which also refer to sex. One lover says, "You hungry, honey... You want something sweet?" (162), while the narrator says, "Let me feed you what you really need" (164). This

discussion of food is also a way to talk about sex without talking directly about sex, thus referring to the taboo which considers sexual discussion inappropriate. "A Lesbian Appetite" celebrates female sexuality in terms of hunger and sensuality and encourages discussion about desire.

Another thing "A Lesbian Appetite" does for lesbian discourse is draw attention away from the final sexual goal of orgasm and focus more on overall sensation by discussing all of the feelings of hunger and all of the taste sensations instead of just one specific objective. The narrator reflects on this variety of tastes when she dreams at the end of all her lovers convening in a big dinner party. She says, "For the first time in my life I am not hungry, but everybody insists I have a little taste. . . . My stomach is full, relaxed happy. . . . I can't stop grinning" (165). This variety is also important to female sexual discourse because by comparing women to such different kinds of food, it acknowledges that all women have unique sexualities and should not be lumped together in one stereotype of sexuality. Such uniqueness helps women to understand their bodies and their desires, and can make them more comfortable talking about sex when they do not feel as if they have to fit a certain sexual standard.

Allison's stories explore many various aspects of lesbian sexuality. She makes her readers aware of sexual repression as well as sexual expression. Like Gilchrist and Walker, she demonstrates how women have been affected by the standards set for them by society, and how those standards affect their attitudes about their own sexuality. She explores the vulnerabilities apparent during sexual relationships. Allison also successfully depicts how women react to each other's sexuality and the different reasons they have sex.

CONCLUSION

Drawing Parallels: Common themes of sexuality in Gilchrist, Walker, and Allison

The last line of "Love of My Life" explains Rhoda's need for literature, and demonstrates how Gilchrist views her stories. Rhoda recalls: "What will you write? my mother asked me, terrified. The truth, I answered. Stories, poems, plays" (237). Rhoda's response to her mother explains sentiments not only of Ellen Gilchrist but also of Alice Walker, Dorothy Allison, and many other women writers. "The truth" becomes the fuel for women's literature. Similarly, when Dorothy Allison comments in her introduction to *Trash*, "Once in awhile, I can make the world I know real on the page" (12), she reflects women's need to examine through writing the ways in which the world has affected them.

Society has constructed ideals about women's sexuality which become standards expected of women. Women distinctly respond to these stereotypes in their literature. Specifically, the short fiction of Ellen Gilchrist, Alice Walker, and Dorothy Allison reflect upon the ways women have been influenced by sexual stereotypes. Their responses to these standards demonstrate that literature can be a powerful tool for women to explore their sexuality and how stereotypes have affected them.

Ellen Gilchrist responds to these standards by creating a prominent character with a multifaceted, changing attitude towards sexuality. She recognizes how southern white women have been encouraged to be especially passive in their relationship to men, and how that expectation can lead to a confused view of their own desires and sense of self worth. In Gilchrist's depiction of Rhoda as a young woman, she shows how women often place importance in their physical beauty. This responds to the stereotype that women are expected to please men, and be

attractive to men, even if it means potentially harming themselves. Rhoda's anorexia shows how she places her sense of worth in her appearance, and how appearance and sexual attractiveness, instead of desire, become major focuses of her sexuality.

As Rhoda becomes more involved in her studies, her sense of worth changes to include her work and achievements. This change shows how Gilchrist responds to women's needs to break away from the stereotypes which have encouraged them to fall into a certain female role which emphasizes appearance, passivity and motherhood. The break from the stereotype continues to change so that by "A Statue of Aphrodite," Rhoda is at a comfort level with her own sexuality and is willing to accept her desires and allow herself to feel sexual.

Like Gilchrist, Alice Walker uses her literature to explore many diverse aspects of female sexuality, but instead of using one character at various stages in her life, Walker uses women in different situations to examine their attitudes towards sexuality. Like the women blues musicians of the early twentieth century, Walker's portrayal of sexually active black women could be seen to reinforce stereotypes surrounding African-American females. However, both Walker and the singers use their art to celebrate feminine sexuality and the power of choice and desire. Walker's character in "The Lover" demonstrates this power as she breaks away from her obligations and expectations as a wife and rediscovers her own sensuality.

Though Walker celebrates female sexuality, she also responds to the distinct ways in which stereotypes have influenced black women negatively. This response is apparent in "Coming Apart" and "Porn" when pornography comes between the relationship between a man and a woman. In "Coming Apart," Walker also brings up several instances in which black women are depicted as savages in pornography, and reflects how this portrayal can cause women to be

insecure and doubt the worth of their own bodies. This also impacts black women because Walker recognizes that black women may attempt to suppress their own desires because they fear the enforcement of this stereotype. Walker's response to stereotypes involves both a recognition of standards which denies women comfort with their sexuality as well as a defiance of expectation and an intense connection with desire.

Walker's stories are similar to Gilchrist's because they both discuss issues of physical presence, rebellion and desire. Like Rhoda, the wife in "Coming Apart" believes that attractiveness to men lies mainly in physical appearance. This belief makes both women feel that they should fulfill a standard of beauty to hold on to a man. However, both women similarly grow to understand their own worth beyond their physical beauty. As in Rhoda's relationship with Raine, the narrator in "The Lover" becomes wrapped up in the idea of being "in love," apart from the physical pleasures of sex. Both characters allow themselves the freedom to be sexual, but they also recognize the excitement of a new relationship which makes them feel somewhat rebellious as well as beautiful and sensual. These women also rebel by having affairs outside of their marriages, which adds to the defiance of stereotype as well as the sense of freedom.

Dorothy Allison also responds to stereotypes with defiance and closely connects to the desires of her characters. She dispels stereotypes by portraying lesbian women as sexually non-passive. In "Demon Lover," Allison recognizes the excitement of eroticism which again rebels against this passive stereotype. At the same time, she recognizes how women have been encouraged to be passive, and demonstrates how that affects a relationship when one partner is fearful or judgmental of the sexual activity in the relationship, such as in "Her Thighs." Allison also demonstrates distinct emotions surrounding sexuality and shows how these emotions can affect a relationship.

These emotions include entrapment and obligation, as in "Monkeybites," when the narrator believes she should forgo her own pleasure to make her partner happy, thus demonstrating how the standard of female self-sacrifice influences relationships, even one between two women. Allison also reflects on how women have been taught that they can use their sexuality to hold on to someone, as in "Demon Lover." Furthermore, in "A Lesbian Appetite," Allison recognizes stereotypes but celebrates lesbian desires without fear of the implications of society's standards. This story defies expectations by allowing women to be in touch with all of their senses and feelings.

By allowing women this freedom, Allison is responding to standards in a similar way to Walker's narrator in "The Lover." Both Allison's characters and Walker's narrator seem in touch with their sexual desires while recognizing the feelings of excitement and rebellion associated with desire. This excitement is also reminiscent of Rhoda's affair with Raine. However, Allison closely aligns with Gilchrist in her discussion of consumption. Both writers demonstrate how people become aware of the way that sex makes a person vulnerable, and they each show the way that lovers can use that vulnerability to manipulate their partner. Gilchrist shows this in Rhoda's relationship with Raine as well as with the fiction writer, and Allison shows this in her narrator's pain over losing Katy in addition to her narrator's apprehension of becoming too close to someone in fear of being manipulated herself.

Gilchrist, Walker, and Allison do not let the standards of society influence their portrayals of women's feelings. Although they do create characters which restrict their sexual activity because of society's influence, such as Allison's Bobby, Gilchrist's young Rhoda, and Walker's wife in "Coming Apart," they also show characters which express their sexuality despite any stereotypes, such as Gilchrist's older Rhoda, Walker's narrator in "The Lover," and Allison's narrator in

"A Lesbian Appetite." They recognize how women have been affected by stereotypes but they allow themselves and their readers to examine sexual behaviors and emotions through the attitudes and activities of their characters. They all recognize that sex can make people vulnerable, as well as excited and comfortable, and their characters display all of these feelings. Women's short fiction responds to sexual stereotypes by exploring all of the facets of female desires, behaviors, and emotions.

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