

“Winter Term” and the Value of Expression

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In an interview between Darryl Pinckney and Elizabeth Hardwick published in “The Paris Review,” Hardwick suggests that books contain an intrinsic ability to heighten the consciousness of the reader. According to Hardwick, “The greatest gift is the passion for reading...it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind” (*The Art of Fiction No. 87*, 20). In recent years, this “moral illumination,” as Hardwick described it, became a prominent part of the development of the feminist movement when the genre expanded to include the sexual relationships between men and women and the social inequalities that women endured. In 1958, Sallie Bingham became the first author to examine the sexual tension inherent within these relationships in a short story entitled “Winter Term,” and this theme has been the foundation of Bingham’s literary career and evolved as a common element within all of her literary works to date. The story was truly revolutionary for its portrayal of dominance and repression within the roles of masculinity and femininity and was published two years prior to John Updike’s Rabbit novels—the series which is accredited with having initially addressed the gender inequalities within socio-sexual relationships. Sallie Bingham was responsible for the masterful instigation of this theme within “Winter Term” and continues to do so as an influential voice in the realm of feminist literature. This use of literature as a means of expression has been essential to the expansion of the feminist movement by promoting the awareness of the inequality associated with gender roles.

The feminist movement has drastically progressed since its formation in the nineteenth century according to the demands of the evolving objectives regarding the advancement of

women's rights. The societal insistence on absolving the injustice of discrimination and further eliminating the stereotypes associated with gender identity has advanced through a combination of awareness, education reform, active protests, and lobbying for political recognition. Yet women still lacked a source of creative expression from which to voice their growing frustration with gender inequality. In her text entitled *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan refers to a "strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States...For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers" (15).

This inherent longing for a means of expression would result in the most recently recognized contribution toward the advancement of the feminist cause through its thematic incorporation within literature. As second wave feminism progressed, the feminist literary movement expanded accordingly, and more and more women searched for a sense of fulfillment within their lives. The worldwide struggle for gender equality became a commonality amongst women, and the expression allotted to them through literature further exonerated a noticeable likeness with regard to the inequalities that they endured and their portrayal in literature. As a result, these personal experiences were incorporated into the various genres and themes of literary expression.

Throughout this time, many feminist authors were receiving recognition for their literary contributions. Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Adrienne Rich were among the most prominent authors of feminist literature within the twentieth century, and they were known for acknowledging a variety of gender issues and incorporating these issues into the themes of their work.

In response to another question from Darryl Pinckney, Elizabeth Hardwick discussed the procedural components of the writing process with regard to thematic selection. According to Hardwick, “It takes many things to make a work of fiction, but I suppose it is true that there is a kind of starting point in the mind, a point that may be different for each piece of work” (*The Art of Fiction No. 87*, 5). Certain recurring “starting points” and themes specific to feminist literature first became prominent during the second wave of the feminist movement with its emphasis on liberating women from the suppression of patriarchal society. According to an article entitled “Topics in Feminism” from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, and political phenomena. Important topics for feminist theory and politics include: the body, class and work, disability, the family, globalization, human rights, popular culture, race and racism, reproduction, science, the self, sex work, and sexuality” (“Topics in Feminism”). Women felt compelled to express their frustration with the societal expectations of compliance, integrity, and servitude, and feminist literature provided them with the ability to counteract these stereotypes by exposing the irony of the female condition.

The universal recognition of gender issues became evident in the contributions of women worldwide. The movement had discovered a creative voice from which to relate to women on an international scale, and there was finally a level of comfort in the knowledge that other women were joining the cause of gender equality. The feminist movement was truly progressing through its ability to relate to women on a more personal level and through the feeling of vindication that women experienced as a result of contributing to the feminist influence. In her text entitled *Simone de Beauvoir*, Lisa Appignanesi suggests that “Literature can act as salvation

in a variety of guises” (64), and, in this sense, women had truly found a source of comfort and emotional liberation within feminist literature.

By the 1950s and 1960s, second wave feminism had been influenced by the sexual revolution, and the focus of the movement evolved from the public sphere to the personal—a shift which was embodied by the phrase “The personal is political.” The extent of this realization continued to develop as the feminist movement advanced, but the accomplishments toward policy objectives hardly translated into visible change. As Anna Jónasdóttir suggests in her text entitled *Why Women are Oppressed*,

Even though equality exists in the form of legal rights and formally equal opportunities, there must be some underlying mechanisms that curtail women’s actual possibilities of realizing their opportunities. Since the late 1960s the quest for theories to deal with issues like these has been a prominent feature in the social and political mobilization of women. A new kind of theoretical knowledge was and still is pursued: one that will reveal the causes of male dominance and women’s subordination and devaluation (2).

The existence of these issues was evidenced by their incorporation within literature even before receiving formal recognition in the late 1960s. Yet much uncertainty exists, not necessarily with the identification of these issues within literature but rather with the proper accreditation of the author who initially incorporated socio-sexual relationships into the feminist literary genre. In a collection of works known as the Rabbit series, author John Updike is recognized for the inclusion of innovating themes within his work such as “ambivalence toward power in women” and a “case against male exploitation,” suggests Stacey Olster in her text

entitled *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike* (69, 71). Furthermore, Olster discusses Updike's objective within his publications: "It was a convention of feminist thought, at least in the sixties and seventies,' Updike explained in an interview, 'that men were murderous in their use of power, and that women, were they allowed power, would of course *not* be...So I was trying to explore, on the realistic level, the whole question of power in women" (68-69). This series, according to Joyce Carol Oates in her review of Updike's last Rabbit novel, is the "much-acclaimed and, in retrospect, hugely ambitious Rabbit quartet" which consists of "'Rabbit, Run' (1960), 'Rabbit Redux' (1971), 'Rabbit Is Rich' (1981) and now 'Rabbit at Rest'" (Oates). Thus Updike's most popular series within which the relational struggles between men and women had been incorporated was published in 1960, but this theme initially published within "Rabbit Run" was incorporated within a piece of literature several years prior by another author—Sallie Bingham.

In his text entitled *The Bingham of Louisville: The Dark History Behind One of America's Great Fortunes*, David Chandler develops a biographical account concerning the history of the prominent and wealthy Bingham family and the mysteries associated with their past. However, the potential interference of Sallie Bingham's father with regard to the allegations within the book and "serious substantive disagreements' over the author's interpretation of his research" led the contracted publisher to withdraw its involvement with the book's publication (vi-vii). Volume 217 of "Contemporary Authors" incorporates a more neutral account of Sallie Bingham's upbringing. "As the daughter of a wealthy Kentucky newspaper publisher, she grew up in an atmosphere of privileged comfort, but as an adult, she has been embroiled in a bitter family fight over control of the Bingham communications empire established by her father" (28). Thus Sallie Bingham was entitled to inherit a portion of the

Bingham estate, including the ownership of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and this privileged upbringing sanctioned her attendance at a prestigious institution for higher education: Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a freshman at Radcliffe in 1954, Bingham experienced a lot of difficulties as she tried to adapt to life as a young Southern woman away at school in the Northeast. In her work entitled *Passion and Prejudice: A Family Memoir*, Sallie Bingham “tried to correct misconceptions about her” in publications such as Chandler’s *The Bingham of Louisville* and also discussed her initial stages as a writer amidst the demands of college life (“Contemporary Authors,” 28). According to Bingham, “After freshman year, I began to take writing classes and to publish regularly in the Harvard literary magazine, *The Advocate*...I realized that not everyone was as frightened and obedient as I had been as a freshman from the decent South, and that realization freed me to write about some of the central aspects of our lives as fifties coeds” (*Passion and Prejudice*, 328). The theme inherent within her early publications at Radcliffe College—the intimate relationships and sexual tension between men and women—truly set a foundation for her literary career and continues to appear even in her most recent works.

The first of Sallie Bingham’s publications to address the development of socio-sexual relationships appeared in a short story entitled “Winter Term,” and she wrote the story as part of a supplemental writing seminar at Harvard University during her collegiate experience at Radcliffe College. She was awarded the Dana Reed Prize for Distinguished Writing in Student Publications for the story in 1958—the same of which had been awarded to John Updike four years prior for his poetry (Hiss). The story was later published in *Mademoiselle* in the same year, just before the sexual revolution of the 1960s. In an interview with Sallie Bingham published within “Publishers Weekly,” Amy Baoz asked about Sallie Bingham’s introductory

publications to which Bingham replied “In college at Radcliffe, I published a story, “Winter Term,” about boys and girls getting together and the miseries of this couple that didn’t have any privacy. It created a real storm and scared me to death. It taught me how risky writing is” (Boaz).

In a personal correspondence with Sallie Bingham, she said that “Winter Term” “was considered shocking because of its frank depiction of the troubling inequality in sexual relationships between young men and young women” (Bingham, Email Interview). The story blatantly addressed premarital intimacy and depicted the inequalities within relationships when such issues were largely ignored. The overlying theme within the story addressed the fallibility of societal expectations with regard to gender roles by exposing the destructiveness of relationships in which the female is suppressed and dependent and the male is domineering and dispassionate. Bingham overtly questioned the societal norms of the 1950s and the images that people maintained in order to coincide with President Eisenhower’s policy of social conservatism. In *Passion and Prejudice*, she discusses her intentions for writing the story and the subsequent reactions that were provoked by the story’s subject matter.

One of my stories, “Winter Term,” described in depressing detail the dependency of a young college couple trapped in a clandestine, unhappy affair. What interested me was not the furtive sex but the emotional dependency that resulted. When the story was published in *The Advocate*, Harvard students called me on the telephone to solicit dates, which shamed me. I was as confused as they were about the difference between fact and fiction. One of the Radcliffe deans was even more alarmed...My story was threatening alumnae giving, she said, because Radcliffe benefactors did not want to know about the students’ sexual lives. I had

never intended to hurt the college that was teaching me what I wanted to do in life—if inadvertently. I accepted the dean’s suggestions and deleted references to Cambridge in the story before it was published in *Mademoiselle* (Passion and Prejudice, 328).

The sexual implications within “Winter Term” and the public’s disapproval of the discussion of such interactions truly laid the foundation for the reception of Sallie Bingham’s future publications. Furthermore, this story provided her with an opportunity to advance her writing career and a biological framework which allowed her to express the tension within her own personal relationships.

“Winter Term” was controversial for its sexual implications within the relationship between two young adults, Hal and Ellie. This relationship is not based on love, but Hal and Ellie feel an overwhelming sense of obligation to each other because of their sexual relationship, even though the relationship is a source of anxiety for Ellie and frustration for Hal. Ellie has become completely dependent on Hal for a sense of purpose within her life—a burden which Hal will never be able to fulfill but which Ellie does not wish to approach alone. The story was written at a time when women did not overtly talk about sex or question their roles as women within society or their own homes. Bingham wrote the story from the male’s perspective and likely did so in order to distance herself from the negative connotations associated with a woman’s openness on such matters. In an article entitled *Strike Hard, Strike Fast*, Sallie Bingham discussed the impact that time and experience had had on her writing. “Society broke open by the early ‘70s, and you could talk about sexuality. I became deeply involved in the women’s movement. I was interested in describing women fully and completely. I moved away

from using male narrators and began writing in the voice of women and about what women were going through..." (Boaz).

The characters within Bingham's stories change, but their struggle toward fulfillment within their relationships remains the same—a commonality which allows for further research with regard to her latest collections. In "Contemporary Authors," Sallie Bingham is described as "the author of short stories, novels, and plays characterized by themes of loneliness, isolation, and mismanaged personal relationships" (28)—themes which recurrently appear in her literature. Her short story entitled "Winter Term" was truly a pioneering story in its portrayal of the sexual and emotional aspects of the relationship between Ellie and Hal, and Bingham continually pursued this theme throughout her literary career, a suggestion which is confirmed by her two latest collections of short stories entitled *Transgressions* (2002) and *Red Car* (2008).

Transgressions is a collection of eleven stories in which the characters are searching for meaning within their lives. In Lynn Cline's article entitled "Sacrifices in the name of love," Sallie Bingham described each story within *Transgressions* as having a "similar pattern" with relation to the others. According to Bingham, "It's really the case of love being an act of betrayal—the woman lets go of her own core, her own integrity, her own self, for someone else. These are transgressions against the self in the name of love" (Cline).

The first story in the collection entitled "Apricots" is the story of a middle-aged woman named Caroline who is unsatisfied with her loneliness and the broken relationships of her past, but her encounter with one of her students—a young man named Charles—encourages her to pursue happiness and fulfillment by changing her perception of herself. The kiss that they share and Charles' attraction for Caroline despite the difference in age prove to her that her life could

be significant and that relationships with other people provide meaning. Just as Ellie perceived her relationship with Hal as providing a sense of purpose to her life, Caroline similarly found a sense of purpose that her life was lacking on the fateful day that Charles came to her house to help her make apricot jam (1-12).

“Benjamin” is the story of an older man who objectifies women for his personal enjoyment until he realizes the sacrifice that these women make for his fleeting satisfaction. He is an artist being recognized for one of his earlier paintings of a young woman named Madeline—a woman who he objectified, fondled, and painted despite her opposition. Benjamin then bought the woman a jewel and told himself that he would always remember her name. Subsequently, Benjamin develops a liking for the young woman who has accompanied him to his hotel and recognition ceremony. He tries to sleep with her but cannot provide a satisfying experience. The next day he looks for a jewel to give to the woman and arrives at the sickening realization that he does not even know her name. Benjamin realizes that his objectification of women as objects of sexual pleasure is a recurring reaction that he has felt toward innumerable others. Benjamin recognizes his perception of women as the result of a lifetime of repeated circumstances but becomes aware of the inherent disgust within his actions only later in life (13-30). Similarly in “Winter Term,” the relationship between Ellie and Hal is simply the sexual objectification of each by the other. The sexual intimacy between the men and women of these two stories provides a sort of sexual satisfaction for the involved individuals but fails immensely to involve any sort of love based on an emotional connection.

“The Pump” examines the understanding between two lovers and the emotional stability inherent within a balanced relationship. The narrator of the story is a woman in her early sixties, a woman who has outlived her husband and is searching for acceptance. She meets a man named

Tom, and in the two weeks that they have known each other, she and Tom have shared an emotional and intimate relationship. Tom encourages the narrator to express the details of her life in their entirety—a luxury which the woman has not enjoyed in decades. Meanwhile, the narrator must have her water pump replaced, and as she watches the man and his family work in her backyard, the narrator realizes that the relationship she shares with Tom has come to an end. Her newfound means of expression is the very reason that Tom has left (85-100). Shortly before the narrator's husband passed away, the man told his wife that she talked excessively. She then thought "...I'll never talk again. I'll never burden the air, or another human being's ears, and I was quiet for some time...So by the time Tom was entangled with me on my white couch, I had a couple years of words dammed up inside, words I hadn't even known existed, anymore than I'd noticed the presence of water in my life before my pump broke and my spigots began issuing air" (93). This relationship between Tom and the narrator directly correlates to that between Ellie and Hal in "Winter Term." Ellie does not correspond with other people because she has become engrossed within her role as the obedient companion to Hal. Similarly, the narrator within "The Pump" had restrained her emotions for so many years during her marriage that she cannot resist the opportunity to be open with Tom. The unfortunate event in both cases is that the man in each relationship is completely unappreciative of the sacrifices that his partner has made in order to comply with the societal expectations associated with being a woman.

Red Car, Sallie Bingham's most recent collection of short stories, exemplifies themes that are strikingly similar to those within *Transgressions*. This collection is truly a thematic extension of Sallie Bingham's early work. In a review of *Red Car* entitled "Bingham's women a rare breed," the author confirms this indication: "There are 12 stories here...Nearly all have women protagonists and nearly all those protagonists bear the Bingham signature: gritty, mature

women who do not merely survive but thrive (or prevail, as Faulkner might have said). All have suffered losses of various kinds, but especially losses that come from human relationships that have soured, gone awry for one reason or another” (Miller).

“Sweet Peas” is the story of a woman named Madeline who is traveling in Paris with her partner, Roland. She and Roland are not married and do not intend to ever formally commit to each other, but the events of this particular day cause Madeline to examine the lack of reciprocity within this decision. As the couple walks to a café in Paris for coffee, Madeline stops to smell the sweet peas for sale at a shop on the sidewalk and is reminded of her mother’s struggles and unhappiness within her own relationships. Madeline and Roland sit together in silence, and Madeline recognizes that her relationship with Roland is not wholly fulfilling and will never be. His detachment within their conversation together reflects the more prominent disinterest that Madeline has come to endure in her relationship with him. This realization gives Madeline the strength to confront Roland, and she leaves the café and Roland behind and takes with her a bouquet of sweet peas and the realization that comfort within a relationship will never equate to the satisfaction of having experienced love (169-179).

“Doing Good” conveys a charitable woman’s decision to adopt a pregnant girl because the act would give her the sense of purpose that is lacking in her marriage (53-66). At first, the woman is asked by a social worker named Annie to consider funding an abortion for a thirteen-year-old girl so that the girl would have a second chance at having a normal life. Annie expresses her disbelief at the woman’s counterproposal to adopt the girl instead, and the woman replies with a compelling affirmation of the purposeful direction inherent within her offer. “I’ve lived for thirty years with a man I loved for perhaps the first six months...I’ve gone through all the usual storms. Recently I decided to give up the house I love more than any place on earth. I

am losing my son to something too vague to be defined. My daughter is already gone. None of this really amounts to anything, but perhaps it will give you some notion of my character...”

(64). When asked about her husband’s potential to disagree to the adoption, the woman replied that her husband would welcome her preoccupation with caring for the girl because “It makes it easier for him to leave me behind” (65). This startling reality within the woman’s life exposes the common theme of purposelessness that exists within the lives of all of Sallie Bingham’s female characters. The woman within Bingham’s “Doing Good” can be likened to the adult version of young Ellie within Bingham’s short story “Winter Term.” If Ellie and Hal’s relationship were to result in a marriage, then the union would likely emulate the relationship that the narrator of “Doing Good” shares with her own husband. Ellie would likely be content with her marriage for a very brief period of time before her purposelessness would overwhelm her, and she would grasp for meaning within an external outlet such as charity. These two women differ slightly, however, in that the woman is seemingly content with her passion for serving others, but Ellie is oblivious to the dejection and desperation that awaits her.

In another story within the *Red Car* collection entitled “His Sons” a woman’s influence softens her partner’s outlook and exposes his inconsistent treatment toward his two children. Tom and Caroline decide to spend the weekend at a cabin with Tom’s two sons: Lenny and David. Tom is very lenient toward Lenny’s behavior—even dismissing his harassment of his younger brother and the use of foul language. David, on the other hand, tries desperately to please his father and avoid wrongdoing, but Tom is unnecessarily strict and insensitive toward David’s apparent youth. Throughout the weekend, Caroline realizes the damaging effects that Tom’s treatment toward his two sons could have on their development, and she tries to reveal these inconsistencies in an effective, yet delicate, manner (115-131). The theme of gender roles

within “His Sons” is paralleled within those defined in “Winter Term.” The female in each relationship feels pressured to be subordinate to her male counterpart yet desperately wishes that she could be a positive influence of compassion within her partner’s domineering behavior. The unfortunate realities within these two stories, however, is that Caroline does not recognize this fault in Tom until she is exposed to his treatment of his two boys, and Ellie has not yet experienced Hal’s behavior toward anyone else apart from her. The women in these two relationships desperately want to maintain their composure and positively influence their partners, but they struggle to do so because of their expected obedience within their relationships.

The development of the feminist movement can be attributed to the impact of feminist literature that exposes an enduring insistence on the recognition of women’s rights. Sallie Bingham’s “Winter Term” was truly a pioneering story in the realm of feminist literature for its exposure of the suppression within intimate relationships. Years later, “Winter Term” has proven to be as timeless as gender inequality itself. The intrinsic theme of these stories continues to provoke action toward the injustices associated with gender inequality—discussions concerning the controversies of premarital sex and the realization of the societal expectations that a woman’s identity is defined by her association with a man. Sallie Bingham has repeatedly denounced the complacent and sacrificial behaviors of women and attributed these behaviors to the societal expectations of women within their gender roles. She continues to write even today, and her persistence with regard to the expression of gender inequality permits women to hope that their own desolation will be exposed and addressed within the feminist movement. As long as Sallie Bingham continues to write, women everywhere will have a chance to be heard.

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