A Conversation with My Father Study Guide

A Conversation with My Father by Grace Paley

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Grace Paley's "A Conversation with My Father" was originally published in the *New American Review* in 1972. It was subsequently included in Paley's second collection of short stories, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, published in 1974. On one level, the story is about women's relationships with then-fathers and sons. Paley recounts a visit between a middle-aged woman and her elderly, bedridden father, who suffers from heart disease. The father reproaches his daughter, a writer, for not constructing straightforward narratives. He encourages her to emulate the nineteenth-century writers Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant, who wrote sparsely realistic tragedies. The daughter attempts to do so, telling him a story about some neighbors, a drug-addicted mother and son. She does not write a tragic ending, but ultimately both mother and son overcome their addictions. Her father rejects her ending, stating that she is unable to face tragedy in life and in fiction. On another level, the story is about storytelling. Within the larger story of the father and daughter, Paley includes two versions of another story, the story about the drug-addicted family. The presence of two stories, the portrayal of a writer writing a story, and the conversation about fiction between the narrator and her father make "A Conversation with My Father" a metafictional work, a story about stories and story-writing.

One of Paley's most critically acclaimed stories, "A Conversation with My Father" exemplifies Paley's efforts to combine realism with experimentation. The similarities between Paley and her protagonist highlight the story's self-reflexive commentary on the author's own narrative techniques. A further connection between Paley's own life and writing and her fiction is found in the disclaimer included in the beginning of *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*: "Everyone in this book is imagined into life except the father. No matter what story he has to live in, he's my father, I. Goodside, M.D., artist, and storyteller.—G. P." "A Conversation with My Father" not only deals with the possibilities of fiction, but it also explains Paley's own fictional processes and aims.

Author Biography

Grace Paley was born in New York City in 1922. Her parents, Isaac and Mary Goodside, were Russian Jewish immigrants who supported socialist and Zionist causes. Paley credits her parents' intellectual interests and political activism for encouraging her own feminist and leftist beliefs. The predominately Jewish area of the Bronx in which she grew up and the immigrant experiences of her parents also influenced Paley's concern with Jewish protagonists and Jewish-American life.

Paley attended Hunter College in New York City but dropped out without receiving a degree. In 1942, at the age of twenty, she married a photographer and cameraman, Jess Paley, with whom she had two children, a son and a daughter. Paley separated from Jess three years later and subsequently married the poet and playwright Robert Nichols. In 1942, Paley studied poetry with W. H. Auden at the New School for Social Research. During her early career as a writer, Paley wrote only poetry. At age thirty-three, she turned to writing short stories. Many of her short stories can be found in her collections *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), *Later the Same Day* (1985), and *The Collected Stories* (1995).

Today, Paley is known for her innovative short stories that combine realism with experimentation and reflect her political commitments. Her stories often deal with feminist and political themes, such as the oppression of women, the working-class lives of New Yorkers, and relationships between generations. These same issues motivate her public activism: Paley has been an outspoken supporter of the feminist movement, and during the 1960s and

1970s was arrested for her involvement in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. A mother of two, an activist, and a professor of creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College, Paley's full life has limited her literary output. Of her relatively small body of work and her decision not to write a novel, Paley has commented: "Art is too long and life is too short. There is a lot more to do in life than just writing."

Paley told "I don't like to write about my stories. On the other hand, I am glad to demystify their sources and meanings." She further commented on the story "A Conversation with My Father": "My father and I often talked about books, not so frequently about my stories. We also argued about my life, my ideas about my friends' lives. The truth is that I had said good night to my father, kissed him, placed his pills by his bedside, saw him insert the oxygen tubes into his nostrils, closed the apartment door, settled into the long subway trip from the north Bronx to my home downtown in Greenwich Village and began, in my head, a paragraph, 'My father is 86 and in bed....' When I reached home (my kitchen table), I wrote much of the rest of what is now the first page of that story, maybe the second as well. So you see, I had no grand theme in mind, in fact no story—only a dreamed and imagined conversation with my father that is true but not a fact.

Plot Summary

"A Conversation with My Father" recounts a discussion between the narrator and her bedridden father, who is eighty-six years old and dying. He asks his daughter to write a "simple story," the kind that Maupassant or Chekhov wrote, "Just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next." The daughter says yes because she wants to make him happy. She does not like stories that follow a plot line from start to finish because they remove all hope—there is no room for something different to happen.

She tells her father this story: A woman had a son. The son became a junkie, and to preserve their relationship, the woman became a junkie, too. After awhile, the son gave up heroin and broke with his mother, who now disgusted him. The woman missed her son.

Her father is not happy with the story. He claims that she left out all the important details, such as descriptions, occupations, and family. The daughter tells the story a second time, adding more details. But the father is still unhappy with the story, but he is pleased that she put the words The End in it, because, he says, it is the end of the woman as a person. The daughter protests, saying that her protagonist is only forty and still has lots of things she could do with her life. Her father disagrees, saying that his daughter simply chooses not to recognize the tragedy of her protagonist's life. "No hope," he says. "The end." The daughter has promised her family to let her father have the last word, so she only revises the end of the story: The woman's son never comes home again, but the woman finds a job as a receptionist in a clinic in a neighborhood with a lot of drug users. The doctors tell her that her experiences are a great asset for this job.

The father does not believe this new ending and insists that the woman will slide back to her bad habits since she has no character. The daughter then says that her new ending is the end. that the woman will stay working as a receptionist. The story ends with the father wondering out loud how long the woman will last in her job and how long it will take his daughter to accept that life is inherently tragic.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As this story begins, the narrator is with her father, an eighty-six year old man who is sick. The man has heart trouble and is unable to get around much. Sensing his death is near he is offering the narrator some last-minute advice. Then he asks the narrator to write a story that includes "recognizable" characters as well as a description of what happens to them.

The narrator is happy to oblige this request but balks at having to follow the standard formula of identifying the main character before describing the story's plot. Having a specific plot, in the narrator's view, makes the story too contrived and takes away any hope that the characters might have.

Nevertheless, the narrator begins to think of a story and finally decides to write a brief story about a family that lives across the street. The story is about a woman and her fifteen-year-old son who becomes a junkie. In an effort to remain close to her son, the woman becomes a junkie, too. Eventually, the boy becomes disgusted by his mother's behavior and leaves. The woman is now alone and quite sad.

As the narrator reads the story to her father, he becomes increasingly agitated. Convinced that she has left certain details out on purpose, he asks her specific questions about the characters in an attempt to get a better idea of who they are. As they speak, the narrator relays the fact that her father was once a physician and then an artist and so, he has a keen interest in detail.

Eventually, the narrator agrees to re-write the story, but cautions her father that it will take some time. Eventually, she finishes and reads her father the new version, a longer, more contrived tale involving the same set of characters. In the new version, the son was the publisher of a periodical who eventually kicked his drug habit after meeting a girl. He began to adhere to a strict natural diet and refused to see his mother until she was drug-free for 60 days.

As the narrator's father contemplates the story, it is clear that he is becoming increasingly saddened by the prospect that the woman's life has effectively ended and wonders how his daughter could write such a sad ending. The narrator argues that her ending does not necessarily mean that the woman's life is over; in fact, she still has many options available to her. The narrator goes on to tell her father that the woman on whom this character is based has actually kicked her drug habit and gotten a job. Her father doubts that this is true before admitting that even if it were true, the woman will no doubt go back to her old ways before long. As the story ends, he wonders aloud if his daughter will ever be able to effectively deal with tragedy.

Analysis

While on the surface this story appears to be simply a dialogue between a father and his daughter regarding story-telling styles, Grace Paley's "A Conversation with My Father" has a much deeper meaning.

As this story unfolds, the narrator and her father debate the importance of character development and bring the story to a well-defined conclusion. In trying to persuade the narrator to write in this manner, the old man is attempting to get her to recognize the fact that he is dying. When the narrator balks at this – "…it takes all hope away" – she is essentially saying that she will not acknowledge the fact that her father is dying until his moment of death arrives.

When the narrator completes her first story, we find that although the tale is not particularly pleasant – the principal characters are drug addicts – it in some ways parallels the lives of the narrator and her father. Recall that in the story, the woman becomes a drug addict so that she can maintain a close relationship with her son. Similarly, the narrator's father is using their mutual love of the written word to help his daughter come to terms with his illness and impending death.

Her refusal to provide a definite conclusion to either story tells us that the narrator is not yet ready to accept her father's fate. By keeping the character's options open in her story, the narrator is illustrating her own hope that her father may still have some time left.

The melancholy mood that the old man slips into at the end of the story most likely arises from the fact that he recognizes that once he is gone, his daughter will be alone, much like the woman in the narrator's story. As a result, he lashes out, finally imploring her to come to terms with his impending death so that when it does occur, she, unlike the woman in the story, will not be caught unprepared.

Characters

Daughter

See Narrator

Father

As the title makes clear, the story recounts a conversation between the protagonist, the daughter, and the antagonist, her father. The father is described in the story's opening as an eighty-six year old man who is confined to his bed. Despite his health problems, he is mentally alert. A former doctor who became an artist in retirement, he is still interested in "details, crafts, [and] technique." He asks his daughter to write a "simple story" about "recognizable people," like the stories written by Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov, nineteenth-century European writers whose stories were realistic and often tragic. The narrator tries to comply, but her father is critical of both versions of the story she made up for him. In the story's final line, he asks his daughter how long it will be before she faces up to the tragedy in life. According to a note included in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*,a collection in which this story appeared, the father in the story represents Paley's real-life father, Isaac Goodside.

Narrator

The narrator is a writer who is visiting her elderly, bedridden father. She talks with him about fiction and attempts to create a simple, direct story of the sort her father admires. While the narrator wants to please her father, she cannot fulfill his request to compose a straightforward, tragic story. The narrator believes that in both literature and life, a plot that follows "the absolute line between two points . .. takes all hope away." In the story she recounts to her father, she leaves open a possibility for change at the end. Her dying father wonders when she will face up to the tragic realities of fiction and life.

Pa

See Father

Themes

Art and Experience

The substance of the conversation between the daughter and her father concerns the way real life should be represented in fiction. The major conflict between the two resides in their different experiences of life and, therefore, different expectations for fiction. The father wishes his daughter would write stories like those of Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov, nineteenth-century European writers whose works reflect more structured societies and whose characters struggle within those societies' limited opportunities. The father, as Paley explains in a note accompanying *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, represents her real father, a Russian who immigrated to the United States at the age of twenty. His experience leads him to desire and appropriate stories about the tragic events of "recognizable people." In an interview with Joan Lidoff published in *Shenandoah*, Paley states that her father "came from a world where there was no choice, where you couldn't really decide to change careers when you were forty-one years old." The father is expressing his "own time in history."

The narrator, though, comes from another historical era, and thus her fiction differs from that of Maupassant and Chekhov. As Paley says in the same interview, "she really lives at a time when things have more open possibility." The narrator believes that the drug-addicted mother in her story might change. She refuses to "leave her there in tiiat house crying." So the narrator has her character get off drugs and become a receptionist in a clinic for drug addicts. For the narrator, a child of post-World War II America, fiction should reflect the opportunities of life not available to previous generations.

Limitations and Opportunities

Closely related to the theme of art and experience is the theme of opportunity. The daughter abhors the kind of story her father wants because it is limiting. For this reason, she hates "plot, the absolute line between two points." Her hatred of plot stems not from" literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life." While her father believes that the woman has no "character" and is destined to a tragic end, the daughter believes that a happy ending might very well ensue. She says of her invention: "She's only about forty. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on.1' The different attitudes of the two towards the possibility of opportunities and change, fictional or real, stem from their different world views and experiences. As Paley says in the *Shenandoah* interview, the story is "about generational attitudes towards life, and it's about history.... [The narrator] was really speaking for people who had more open chances. And so she brought that into literature, because we just don't hop out of our time so easy."

Style

Metafiction

"A Conversation with My Father" is a metafictional story; that is, a fiction about fiction. The inclusion of a story within a story, the descriptions of the narrator writing that story, and the narrator and her father's conversation about fiction are all elements of metafiction. Metafictional stones prompt the reader to think about how stories are structured, why writers develop their stories as they do, and what expectations readers might bring to stones. These issues make up the content of the discussion between the narrator and her father. Why, the father asks, does the narrator not write simple narratives about people who are familiar to us, rather than writing about "people sitting in trees talking senselessly, voices from who knows where?"—a reference to one of the narrator's (and Paley's) earlier stories. But to the narrator, fiction should reflect one's experience in life, and the two versions of the story she writes reflect her less conventional views both of narrative and of life experience. The overall narrative of "A Conversation with My Father "also invites a consideration of these two viewpoints. Is it itself a simple, tragic story, as her father would like it to be, or an open-ended story without a straightforward plot, as the narrator prefers? Paley's metafictional technique causes readers to reflect not only on the story's theme and structure, but also on the themes and structures of all fiction—and, by extension, on the themes and the structure that people perceive in their own lives.

Plot

One of the major elements of metafiction in "A Conversation with My Father" is the way Paley plays with the concept of plot Near the beginning of the story, the narrator states her opinion about plot. Although she wants to please her father, she feels passionately about the constraints of plot, "the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life." The two plots in Paley's story, then, are open-ended. The story of the drug-addicted mother and son is left hanging. After finishing one version with the words "The End," the narrator revises the story to extend the ending, and ellipses, three dots signifying uncertain continuation, ambiguously conclude the story. The story of the conversation between the narrator and her father is also incomplete, ending with a question. Finally, taken together, the two stones which comprise "A Conversation with My Father" frustrate attempts to identify with certainty specific plot elements of the story, such as the rising action, the climax, or the denouement.

Historical Context

The early 1970s followed a time of great social upheaval in the United States. In the 1960s, the country was divided over issues that affected nearly everyone in some capacity, civil rights, the Vietnam War and the women's movement were among the most important. The broad-based civil rights movement of the early 1960s gave way, in the wake of the deaths of Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X in 1965 and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, to the more radical politics of a younger generation of activists epitomized by the Black Power movement associated with Angela Davis, the Black Panthers, and others. Likewise, protests over the United States's role in Vietnam (Paley was arrested in several antiwar demonstrations) became more acrimonious as the war continued. In 1970, four students were killed by the National Guard on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio during a peaceful protest. During this period of protest, many women assumed public roles of leadership. As a consequence, the women's movement revived a century-long attempt to gain an Equal Rights Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. Consciousness-raising groups, the legalization of birth control and abortion, and affirmative action laws fueled their progress, though the Equal Rights Amendment, passed by Congress, eventually failed to be ratified.

In many ways, these conflicts were played out within families as a struggle between generations. Children fought with their more conservative, Depression-era parents over issues of race, politics, and morality. Throughout this period, college campuses became centers of protest and spawned what Paley and others called "youth culture." In "A Conversation with My Father," the mother and son become addicted to drugs and their kitchen becomes a center for "intellectual addicts," many of whom follow the teachings of Timothy Leary, a psychology professor who advocated the use of the hallucinogenic drug LSD. The mother and son in the daughter's story reflect the widespread experimentation with drugs during the 1960s and 1970s, which was often seen as part of a social revolution involving the development of a new consciousness and freedom from the constraints of tradition.

Critical Overview

"A Conversation with My Father" is Paley's most critically discussed work, perhaps because it is also her most overtly metafictional one. When it was first published in 1972, critics hailed it as one of the best stones about storytelling ever, since it is a story which reflects the complexities of life through the complexities of fiction. It has also been commended for its articulation of feminist themes.

The question of Paley's relationship to her characters has been a matter of critical debate. The disclaimer at the beginning of Enormous Changes at the Last Minute states that "Everyone in diis book is imagined into life except the father. No matter what story he has to live in, he's my father, I. Goodside, M.D , artist, and storyteller." This statement leads one to assume that the unnamed narrator is Paley herself. Further proof is Paley's discussion elsewhere about visiting her father when he was terminally ill, and the reference within the story to Paley's other fiction, namely the comment her father makes about people talking in trees which refers to the short story, "Faith in the Trees." But, as Neil Isaacs notes in a study of Paley's short fiction, readers should refer to the narrator as Paley only "as long as we understand that we are talking about a Grace imagined into life as the Paley storytelling persona." According to Isaacs, critics such as Rose Kamel, who refer to the narrator as Faith (a central character in many of Paley's stories) are mistaken. Marianne DeKoven, writing in the Partisan Review, distinguishes between the narrator and Paley. She argues that Paley the writer is committed to a political and moral role for the storyteller, in "not only ... a nonlinear vision of life's events, but also, ultimately, in a profound commitment to freedom as a primary value."

In an essay published in *Delta*, Nicholas Peter Humy agrees that responsibility for one's creative writing is a central theme of the story. For Humy, the conversation is a struggle over patriarchal demands upon language. The narrator, by refusing to tell the story her father wants to hear, refuses to alter "the lives of her inventions to his given end and meaning, to his law." D. S. Neff, writing in *Literature and Medicine*, offers a very different reading of the story. For him, the physician-father is struggling to make his daughter accept his impending death. He wants her to write, as a sort of therapy, a traditional tragedy with an unambiguous conclusion. The narrator, by refusing to end her stories, is trying to overcome death.

In Grace Paley: Illuminating the Dark Lives, Jacqueline Taylor argues that one reason critics misread Paley is due to their failure to recognize her "boldly female" voice. Paley, Taylor argues, "manifests a willingness to speak the unspeakable, she is irreverent, comic, compassionate and wise." Taylor argues that "A Conversation with My Father" might be titled "A Conversation with the (Literary) Patriarchs," because it serves as a meditation on Paley's subversion of male narrative conventions. The narrator's decision to write a new, hopeful ending to the drug-addicted mother's story reveals her "recognition of the fluidity of life and her resistance to narrative resolutions." While the father might protest, the narrator-daughter has, nonetheless, written her own story.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following overview of Paley's "A Conversation with My Father," she focuses on the relationship between life and fiction in the story.

Known as an innovative, "one-of-a-kind" writer, Grace Paley writes stories that are deceptively simple. At first they seem uncomplicated, but a closer reading reveals Paley's careful craftsmanship. She began her writing life as a poet but came to find that she could not express in poetry the ideas that she and her women friends were discussing, so she turned to fiction. Many of her stones center on the specific concerns of women and the roles society places upon them. Paley's stories, while relating everyday matters, always have social or political motives, yet they never moralize. Paley simply presents a world filled with people who, like herself, are aware of the world around them.

"A Conversation with My Father" is one of Paley's best-known and most critically discussed stones. It is trademark Paley, not only in its concern for issues of female identity, but in its use of a narrative technique that has strong elements of postmodernism. The narrator in "A Conversation with My Father" is also a writer. She relates the story of a conversation with her father during which she tells him two versions of another story. She is a self-aware, self-referential narrator, placing herself in the story she tells her father, continually commenting on her relationship with the stories she has created. The narrator presents her own—and Paley's—view of what constitutes a story. The story itself defies traditional literary conventions such as a linear plot; there is no "end," just the assertion that life will continue with unknown twists and turns. Because the story so clearly merges Paley's beliefs with those of her narrator, some critics have pointed to the narrator's dismissal of a linear plot in "A Conversation with My Father" as evidence that nothing happens in Paley's fiction. Paley, however, maintains, "Plot is nothing. Plot is only movement in time. If you move in time, you have a plot."

In many ways, "A Conversation with My Father" is a comment on both the open-endedness of life and the freedom a writer has in narration. The story relates a conversation between a middle-aged woman and her father, who, breathing from an oxygen tank and giving "last minute advice," presumably is dying. The father wants his daughter to tell him a "simple story... the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov." Though the woman wants to please her father, she finds it impossible to tell him what he wants to hear. Paley's narrator has "always despised" stories in which there is an "absolute line between two points," for such a fixed line "takes all hope away." When the narrator vocalizes these beliefs to her father, however, he asserts that by maintaining a belief in hope, she is simply trying to deny the tragedy that exists in life—the tragedy of the character she creates for him and, by implication, the tragedy of his own imminent death.

Paley has acknowledged the autobiographical slant of much of her fiction—her narrator shares many similarities with Paley—so it is no surprise to find that the narrator also echoes many of Paley's own beliefs about writing. The narrator of the story, like Paley's authorial voice, constantly merges fact and fiction. In keeping with this, the narrator chooses to tell a story that "had been happening for a couple of years right across the street," of a woman who became a junkie to keep her teenage son company. The son kicked his habit and left his mother alone and grieving. The narrator's father accuses his daughter of having "left everything out" and asks for such details as the mother's appearance, her family background, and her marital status. In her book Grace Paley: Illuminating the Dark Lives, Jacqueline Taylor notes, "The questions are notable for their preoccupation with defining the woman of the story according to key patriarchal categories for women: looks, social status, and marital status." In an article published in Delta, Nicholas Humy points out that the father's choices "happen to be the traditional ones, those that are usually made inadvertently by writers of fiction, and so seem not to be choices at all, but necessary to the form which will convey what the work is about." Though these critics differ in their reasons why the father needs the answers to these questions, their positions are not in reality contradictory, their insights show how questions of what defines a woman are intertwined with traditional viewpoints, even on seemingly unrelated matters.

The narrator's response to her father also highlights this connection. Her protest—"Oh, Pa, this is a simple story about a smart woman who came to N.Y.C. full of interest love trust excitement very up to date___Married or not, it's of small consequence"—shows that what is important to the narrator is the woman's life, not her definition through appearance or relationships. The narrator does answer her father's questions but makes sure that any inclusion of these details in the revised story does not enrich it. The woman in the story changes from being simply "a woman" to being a "fine handsome woman," yet neither her behavior nor her outcome changes. The narrator is determined to appease her father because he is ill, but still not give up her own set of beliefs, both about women and about writing. She remains true to her own artistic vision. It is interesting to note, as well, that in her fiction Paley does not generally provide details of appearances or relationships. So in "A Conversation with My Father" there is another connection: one between author and narrator. Paley's narrator asserts Paley's own social and literary beliefs.

In the revised story, the narrator keeps the same sequence of events but fleshes them out with details. These details border on the absurd, however— "[The woman] had a son whom she loved because she'd known him since birth (in helpless chubby infancy, and in the wrestling, hugging ages, seven to ten, as well as earlier and later)." Her father knows that these details are added only for the sake of his ideas of what should be included in a story—they are not sincere—and only comments that his daughter has "a nice sense of humor." The narrator allows her own character to intrude further, mentioning neighbors who also witness the woman's fall into drug addiction and grief; the opening "Once in my time" becomes "Once, across the street from us." Through inclusion of the neighbors, the narrator subtly reminds the listener that the story of this woman is, in fact, based on a real one, thus admonishing against adding extra or glamorous details simply to make a story more exciting or fulfilling. The ending of the

revised story also alludes to another falsity—it finishes with those dramatic words that really only signify that the telling of the story is over, The End. Her father, while expressing his continuing dissatisfaction that his daughter has failed to tell a "plain story," approves at least of one thing: "The end. The end You were right to put that down. The end," he says.

Thus the daughter and father embark on another debate, not on what constitutes good writing but, by implication, on how she is or is not accepting the fact that he is going to die soon. They continue to couch their dialogue in a discussion of the life of the woman in the story. When her father declares that his daughter has depicted a tragedy, or "the end of a person," she protests, '"No, Pa,' I begged him. 'It doesn't have to be She's only about forty. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on.'" The woman feels it is her duty to interact with her story. After all she has a responsibility because "that woman lives across the street," and she changes the story again, giving the woman a job in a community clinic in the drug-ridden East Village where her experience as a junkie makes her invaluable. The daughter fully believes that her feelings should influence her creation, which is really an extension of her beliefs. She does not acknowledge, however, that her father also allows his own feelings to influence his interpretation of the creation, and that at eighty-six, it makes utter sense that his feelings may differ from her own. Her father believes some things already to be fixed, like the fact of his death. He asks his daughter, "Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?" He is not referring only to what becomes of the woman in the story, crying her "terrible, face-scarring, time-consuming tears"—he is referring to his own death.

Victoria Aarons has noted, in an article in Studies in Short Fiction, that "the line between fiction and reality is precarious [in Paley's prose]... for her characters, identity is a continual process." Aarons also states that dialogues in Paley's fiction are a source of power because they give the characters possibilities for the future by preventing any one resolution. Her analysis could very well have been written for "A Conversation with My Father." The line, always difficult to draw, becomes invisible by the end as the two stories merge into one. The narrator's story blends into the story of her dialogue with her father. The revised ending is not set apart from the rest of the text as were the two previous versions of the story, and the woman works at the clinic in the present tense; in fact "right now, she's the receptionist." The narrator, in her retelling of the life of her neighbor, shows the infinite number of things that can happen in a life, the choices and the opportunities; instead of working at the community clinic, she could have been a "teacher or a social worker. An ex-junkie' Sometimes it's better than having a master's in education! " The narrator also implies that the meaning of a life is not simply to be summed up at its end, for every person will indeed die. She refuses to accept her father's belief that what is most important in his future is his death. By changing the woman's story at the end, she asserts a powerful statement—that most important is the living, and in the mere fact of living rests renewed hope for a future.

Source: Rena Korb, "Overview of 'A Conversation with My Father'," in Short Stories for Students, Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Humy discusses the disagreement between the narrator and her father about what a story should be, and how this disagreement relates to their differing views of freedom and predetermination.

"I would like you to write a simple story just once more...."

It seems a straightforward request to the narrator's aging father, although he does ask specific qualities of his story: "the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write. Just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next."

This request is made in the second paragraph of "A Conversation with My Father," but we are already aware of the difference between the sort of story the father wants to hear and that which the narrator is in the process of telling. The father, like all aging fathers, is concerned with the past. His request is for a story like those of the past, like those the narrator "used to write." His story is to be peopled with "recognizable" characters, those he is familiar with, and is to tell "what happened to them next." The narrator's story, "A Conversation with My Father," [exists] not in the past, but in the present. Its events and characters do not exist prior to the writing of their story.

My father is eighty-six years old and in bed His heart, that bloody motor, is equally old and will not do certain jobs any more It still floods his head with brainy light But it won't carry the weight of his body around the house. Despite my metaphors, this muscle failure is not due to his old heart, he says, but to a potassium shortage.

In these first five sentences we are shown how the narrator wishes to tell her father's story. He and his condition are not described with language, but created in it. The metaphors which the narrator uses do not help to make her father "recognizable" to the reader, rather, they call attention to the language and testify that the act of writing will intrude upon the tale. The father protests. It is a description of him, after all, and, "despite [her] metaphors," he and his "potassium shortage," would like to be found within it. It would seem to the father that his daughter has forgotten the responsibilities of the writer.

These responsibilities seem to be derived from Aristotle's theory of tragedy as it appears in Poetics, which is to say that, whether or not the father has read Poetics, he is one of those who have been made to expect, by the various wrappings which are used to package art in our culture, that literature will provide a purgative arousal of fear and pity brought about by the description or imitation of an action, culminating in the demise of the flawed hero. The father also asks that the story be neatly contained within its bounds consisting of beginning, middle, and end, and, in order to ensure its status as bearer of truth, that the protagonist be faceless enough to be universal ("recognizable"), while maintaining consistent enough character to go from one action to the next according to the laws of probable cause.

When she agrees to tell her father his story, one "that begins: 'There was a woman...' followed by plot, the absolute line between two points," the narrator agrees to repress those intrusions which her writing makes on the tale, to take "all hope away," denying her own beliefs that "everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life." At this point, as though to close the lid on the matter, "A Conversation with My Father" switches from the present to the past tense.

But the lid is not quite closed, for the narrator has "misunderstood [her father] on purpose." She chooses as the center figure of her story a woman, who cannot properly be a "tragic" character, and, while claiming to simply write down the story she has thought of, implying that the roles of writer and writing are no more than the chroniclers of the action, she "lays bare" the arbitrary nature of the elements of a causal progression in any fiction.

Her "unadorned and miserable tale" does seem to move in "an absolute line between two points," and yet the narrator demonstrates that the line exists only as her creation, and that, as William Gass points out, "its telling is a record of the choices, inadvertent or deliberate, the author has made from all possibilities of language" [Fiction and the Figures of Life, (1971)]

It is precisely those choices to which she makes her father attend. By maintaining her claim on the tale ("Once in my time..."), by failing to give it a proper end, allowing it to seep into the present ("We all visit her"), by describing neither compelling causes ("which is not unusual," "for a number of reasons"), nor "recognizable" characters, she forces her father to ask her to fill in what he feels is absent. "You know there's a lot more to it. You know that. You left everything out."

His main concern is for a more complete knowledge of the woman's character, for he knows, as do all Aristotelians, that character is the servant of dramatic action, that without it the action will not reveal the moral purpose of its agents, and hence, the meaning of the tale.

The greater part of any character in a given fiction is always left unstated. The reader of "A Conversation with My Father" is comfortable in attributing to the character of the father a certain life-in-words, though he has almost none of the necessary organs for life-on-earth, as it were, with only his legs, heart/motor, and brain somewhat resembling a lightbulb. What of his bowels'? to say nothing of his nose, throat and ears In the narrator's "unadorned and miserable tale" the mother and her son are not described physically, historically, or emotionally at all. When the father asks for details of the woman's hair and heritage, he is making choices, his choices, of what is "of consequence." His choices happen to be the traditional ones, those that are usually made inadvertently by waters of fiction, and so seem to him not to be choices at all, but necessary to the form which will convey what the work is about.

Harold Bloom, in "The Breaking of Form," reminds us that the word "about" means "to be on the outside of something. "All that a poem can be about, or what a poem is other than trope, is the skill or faculty of invention or discovery, the heuristic gift." The narrator

shares this sense of her work, and does not see herself as relating to her father his story, history, but as telling a story. She wants him to see the process of storytelling anew, to see how, in the telling, the story becomes defamilianzed, becomes, not what it is about, but what it is. And what it is is a form which, according to Shklovsky, reveals the experience of its making.

What the father sees as unmotivated events in the narrator's first attempt are unmotivated only in the referential sense of what the story is about. They are perfectly motivated in the technical sense of calling attention to the telling of the tale.

But the telling of the tale is not of primary interest to the father, for the creation of "telling" subverts the disclosure of "told." The daughter is aware that a story is no more and no less than the language in which it is created, and the desire by which it is formed. The father's demands for disclosure of what went before the telling of the tale are attempts to halt the free flow of desire, to reentangle his daughter in the incestuous net of Oedipus, where her telling would become told, would become the law of the father. And the narrator's father invokes law when he demands disclosure of what was not spoken of the woman:

"For Godsakes, doesn't anyone in your stories get married? Doesn't anyone have the time to run down to City Hall before they jump into bed?"

"No," I said "In real life, yes. But in my stories, no." "Why do you answer me like that?"

In order to explain her choices the narrator, in exasperation, steps outside of the tale and tells her father what her fiction is "about," and in so doing, undercuts to a certain extent, the very freedom, the very hope and desire, she had maintained in its telling.

"Oh, Pa, this is a simple story about a smart woman who came to N.Y C. full of interest love trust excitement very up to date, and about her son, what a hard time she had in this world. Married or not, if s of small consequence "

But to the father, it is "of great consequence," for he senses the woman in the story as though she were flesh, as though he has somehow reached through the artifice of fiction to shake the hand of this person "with heavy braids, as though she were a girl or a foreigner," and wants better to understand her, understand the character, not the artifice: "... but listen. I believe you that she's good-looking, but I don't think she was so smart." Character and action do not correspond as the rules state they should. Intelligence would have prevented her from acting as she did.

And, in a sense, the narrator agrees with her father that the woman she has created has a life, though not one of flesh. As an invention in language the woman is alive and responsive to language, to its intrusions, to its metaphors. The narrator has already expressed her dislike for any portion of a fiction which is predetermined, outside of language, for such predetermination "takes all hope away," and, in agreeing with her father that her explanation of what the story was "about" may have precluded a portion of her character's "life," she reiterates her sense of the relation between character and language in fiction.

Actually that's the trouble with stories. People start out fantastic.

You think they're extraordinary, but it turns out as the work goes along, they're just average with a good education. Sometimes the other way around, the person's a kind of dumb innocent, but he outwits you and you can't even think of an ending good enough.

The father, "still interested in details, craft and technique," accuses his daughter of "talking silly" when she explains that sometimes the end is not predetermined by traits attributed to the character and wholly controlled by the author. She suggests that sometimes it is reached in "some agreement" between the writer and the invention, mediated by the language.

In the second attempt to please her father, the narrator begins her story as though to include her father. Instead of "Once in my time..." the new story opens, "Once, across the street from us...." She has also kept the story entirely in the past tense and given it an end ("The End"), in capital letters, closing the tale from any reverberation into the present. It is at this point that we are presented with the most marked contrast between written text and speech. It is here that we see the tension in the concessions the narrator makes in this text within a conversation. The narrator has provided her father with an end, has filled out the causal relationships between one event and the next, has even given her character a hint of a tragic flaw ("She would rather be with the young, it was an honor, than with her own generation"), and yet her father is not entirely satisfied. He has three comments.

"Number One: You have a nice sense of humor." Here he is referring to the way in which his daughter chose to explain the juxtaposition of various events. The story exposes probable cause for what it is—a convention—by using irony to systematically undo our understanding and belief in causality. The mother becomes a junkie like her son "in order to keep him from feeling guilty." She wants to prevent him from feeling guilty "because guilt is the stony heart of nine tenths of all clinically diagnosed cancers in America today." And in double irony, she explains that the mother loved her son "because she'd known him since birth (in helpless chubby infancy and in the wrestling, hugging ages, seven to ten, as well as earlier and later). "The father, by insisting on determining factors for all events in the fiction, is given an explanation for drug addiction and mother love which seems to Mm to be a joke.

"Number Two: I see you can't tell a plain story. So don't waste time." This comment echoes the conclusion of the second story, ("she would cry out, My baby! My baby! and burst into terrible face-scarring, time-consuming tears"), and comments upon the different demands father and daughter make on a story. The daughter wishes her father to hear her story. Instead he discounts the tale as unrecognizable, unwilling to listen to that which is new.The narrator shares with Shklovsky the belief that "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" ["Art as Technique," in Russian Formalist Criticism, edited by Paul A. Olson, (1965)]. She does not feel that failure to arrive at an anticipated end is a waste of time, but that it is rather an exercise in the process of perception, which "is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."

But the father still desires an end to the story, both in the sense of conclusion and purpose. A "plain story" would provide this but his daughter's tale, while seeming to come to a proper end, has already undermined, through irony, the means she has used to arrive there. Nonetheless, the father will try to salvage that which he so desires.

"Number Three. I suppose that means she was left like that, his mother. Alone. Probably sick">"

I said, "Yes."

"Poor woman Poor girl, to be born in a time of fools, to h ve among fools The end. The end. You were right to put that down The end "

But the narrator knows that the telling of a story is the creating of a story is the creating of a form, and she will not let her father impose the end which the tragic form dictates.

I didn't want to argue, but I had to say, "Well, it is not necessarily the end, Pa "

Her father is insistent. "You don't want to recognize it. Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end." He feels that the form of tragedy is a given truth, just as he feels his eventual death to be. He urges his daughter to face the dictates of form just as we are told to brave death. His daughter's life, like his, will teach the lesson of death. "In your own life, too, you have to look it in the face." And, in speaking those words, he demonstrates his own desire to delay that end, while still entrenching himself in the conviction of its meaning.

He took a couple of nitroglycerin. "Turn to five," he said, pointing to the dial on the oxygen tank. He inserted the tubes into his nostrils and breathed deep He closed his eyes and said, "No."

Though the narrator "had promised the family to always let him have the last word when arguing," she recognizes "a different responsibility" towards him. She will demonstrate to him that it is not in the end that meaning is found by changing the ending of the woman's story. Believing that form dictates the limits of perception, the father is convinced that meaning resides in the end, in death, in the summing up of life. His daughter, believing that perception gives rise to the possibilities of form, and knowing that all stories and lives must eventually come to an end of some kind, at some point, plays Scheherazade to her father, dislocating the end from the tale, trying to save her father's death from meaning. Life might have no pity; it does not commute the sentence of death, but that sentence is only the last of the tale, and its connection to the body of the story is no more secure than that between the creation and its conception. The woman in the story exists for the telling, fathers for the living. The daughter knows this, and, as she moves her tale out of the stasis of the end, as she shifts the story of the woman out of the past and into the present tense, she reminds us that she has also played Scheherazade to the reader. She begins her new ending as she did the second version of the story, with a colon. But the addition has the same spacing as the body of "A Conversation with My Father" has had and is not indented. The father has closed his eyes; the narrator is addressing the reader. The doctor's speech is presented in

quotation marks, which have appeared before only in dialogue between the father and his daughter, so that the two stories merge into one. When the father breaks in, "The doctor said that?" we are made aware of the play between past and present tense, made aware of the weaving together of the two stones. The intrusion of the father's voice at this point lays bare the device of the contrasting forms of the stories within a story, and transfers our perception of the father's story "into the sphere of a new perception," where, ironically, written text becomes speech, speech a written text. This piece is the story of a conversation and it traces for us the struggle that we all encounter when we acquire language, the tool of the father, and use it with, for, or against him. Grace Paley is perfectly aware of the relationship she is entering into with the father when she is telling a story. On the page facing the table of contents of the collection in which the story appears, she informs us: "Everyone in this book is imagined into life except the father." The father cannot be imagined into life in words for he dwells in them already. The narrator, by telling the stones within the father's story, has demonstrated what the responsibility of the storyteller is not. She has not formed the lives of her inventions to his given end and meaning, to his law. And, in the telling of her father's story, she has commuted the sentence, and, like the narrator of "Debts," fulfilled her true responsibility: "That is, to tell their stories as simply as possible in order, you might say, to save a few lives."...

Source: Nicholas Peter Humy, "A Different Responsibility Form and Technique in G Paley's 'A Conversation with My Father'," in Delta, May, 1982, pp. 87-92

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, DeKoven examines the reconciliation of postmodern form with traditional subjects in Paley 's works, particularly in "A Conversation with My Father" and "Faith in the Afternoon."

... Though Paley has published only two collections of stories, The Little Disturbances of Man and *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, she is nonetheless an important writer—important in the significance of the fictional possibilities she realizes rather than in the uniform merit of her published work. She is not always at her best. But when she is, Paley reconciles the demands of avant-garde or postmodern form for structural openness and the primacy of the surface with the seemingly incompatible demands of traditional realist matenal for orchestrated meaning and cathartic emotion.

"A Conversation with My Father," in Enormous Changes, makes of this seeming incompatibility an argument between father and daughter, from which emerges the statement, crucial to Paley's work, that traditional themes can no longer be treated truthfully by formally traditional fiction: formal inventiveness and structural open-endedness not only make fiction interesting, they make it "true-to-life." Paley's concern is not mimesis or verisimilitude, but rather the problem of creating a literary form which does not strike one as artificial; which is adequate to the complexity of what we know. Her narrator in "A Conversation with My Father," calls traditional plot "the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes away all hope. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life." Her father, arguing that plot is the truth of tragedy, wants her to write like Chekhov or Maupassant: "Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end." Paley's narrator-surrogate, arguing for open-ended hope and change, clearly bests her father in the conversation. But in the story, Paley gives him the last word: the setting is his hospital room, and he speaks from what we may assume is his deathbed. His lecture on writing is "last-minute advice," and the closing speech, from father's pain to daughter's guilt, is his:" 'How long will it be?' he asked. 'Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?'"

The assertion of hope through change and open-endedness is therefore neither easy nor unambiguous. As the literary father sees, an inevitable component of optimistic belief in saving the situation through "enormous changes at the last minute" is evasion of genuine and unavoidable horror, the father's tragedy. As Faith herself says in "Living" {Enormous Changes), "You have to be cockeyed to love, and blind in order to look out the window at your own ice-cold street."...

The people Paley's narrator in "A Conversation with My Father," would accuse of having merely "literary reasons" for rejecting traditional plot might explain the "enormous change" as an interesting substitute for outworn, tedious literary convention (linear plots are stale and boring), infusing new life into fiction. But Paley's structures are more than that. They are rooted not only in an assertion of open-endedness and possibility, and in a nonlinear vision of life's events, but also, ultimately, in a profound commitment to

freedom as a primary value (nonlinearity is not as alien to Paley's politics as it might appear). For many postmodernists, that freedom is problematic; tangled with fear of chaos on one hand and of authority on the other... But the freedom implied for Paley by "enormous changes," the freedom from inevitability or plot, is synonymous with hope; hence her larger assertion that open-endedness in fiction is the locus of "the open destiny of life," to which everyone is "entitled"—a strongly political statement.... Tentatively and comically, Paley offers fiction's "enormous changes" as a warbling counter-note to the tragic gong, even in twentieth century political life, that notoriously unredeemed domain.

The tragic subject matter of Paley's work reaches the reader emotionally as pathos, a tricky entity because it so easily becomes sentimental. However, pathos remains pathos in Paley's work: she jerks no tears but neither does she freeze them. Instead, she distracts the reader from pathos at dangerous moments, when sentimentality threatens, by calling attention to her wildly inventive, comic language and imagery. In those moments when her language takes on the burden of simultaneously communicating and distracting from pathos, Paley creates a unique and fascinating literary object....

At the heart of Paley's engagement with everyday life is her deep empathy with her characters. Even the deserters and betrayers she allows their "reasons," as she might say, and the rest she actively likes—a stance even more unusual in serious postmodern fiction than her assertions of hope in the face of our despair. It is not surprising that this uncommon empathy, which is really the condition of adherence to subjects of everyday life, is the province of a woman. Empathy and compassion are legacies of sexism that women do well to assert as privileged values rather than reject as stigmata of oppression. Uncomfortable as it makes her to write in such a predominantly male tradition, as a woman in the avant-garde, Paley is in an especially propitious position to unite interesting forms with important themes. She uses innovative form much as she uses innovative activism, to make new the endlessly dreary and shameful moral-political world we inhabit...

Source: Mananne DeKoven, "Mrs Hegel-Shtein's Tears," in Partisan Review, Vol. XLVHI, No 2,1981, pp. 217-23.

Critical Essay #4

Lidoff was an American educator and critic who wrote extensively on women writers. The interview excerpted below is a composite of private conversations and classroom discussions held while Paley visited the University of Texas in 1981, In the excerpted portion of the interview, Paley discusses storytelling, "A Conversation with My Father," and her feelings regarding feminism.

[Lidoff]: At your reading last night, you said that all story tellers are story hearers. Would you tell us some more about that?

[Paley]: If you're a person who doesn't pay attention, and who isn't listening, you won't be a writer, you won't even be a story teller. Those of you who are writers from the very beginning of your lives were probably unusually attentive children. You heard things that the other kids on the block really weren't listening to. You may not have known it; you didn't go.around when you were six years old saying "Oh, what I heard today!" but you probably did tend to come home from school with more stories for your mother or for whoever your afternoon-listener was. If they were there, if there were people to listen, you tended to be a very talkative child. You were an extremely good listener also, which everybody doubted, always saying to you,

'Will you listen?" when you knew that you heard four times as much as anybody. If there was no one to listen to you, you probably heard anyway. You were a listener and you felt crummy because you were storing up all this information all the time. There's an example in that really wonderful story in Chekhov where the son dies and the father is a coachman and he keeps going around looking for people to tell "My son, my boy died" to, to tell them what happened. And nobody is listening to him at all. Finally hejust takes his horse and tells the story to the horse. I think there are a lot of story hearers that nobody listens to. I think the world is full of people that nobody listens to who have a lot to say. And then I think there are people who aren't saying anything, who are storing it all up for some moment.

Is there anyone in particular in your family who was a story teller who influenced you?

When I say a story hearer, that doesn't mean that you just listen to people tell stones Sometimes you really are extracting them from people. You say, "Well, what happened?" And they say "Nothing. " That happens in a lot of families. And it takes you years sometimes to extract stories from people in your family. But no, my father was a very good talker. And my mother as a result was somewhat more quiet. But he really was a good talker, and he spoke well about lots of things. A lot of people told stories: my grandmother, aunts, mother, sister. I don't think they thought of themselves as storytellers, but neither do most people. But almost everybody in this room, in this school, is a story teller. You tell stories all the time. So it's really one of the things that almost anybody can do. It's something that's natural. I have a little grandchild and I just know that from the first time she can put half a sentence together she's going to tell me some little story. She's already telling jokes. People tell stories everywhere in the world.

When you and I were sitting around having coffee we must have told each other fourteen stories....

In your story "A Conversation with My Father, " the characters discuss the problem of plot. People are sometimes critical of your stories, and say nothing happens in them, there is no plot. I wonder if perhaps that's a peculiarly woman's form of story, where a lot happens, but it's not always what's called plot.

Well, I think by writing that story I sort of screwed myself up, because people really don't read. I mean, a great deal happens in almost any one of those stories, really sometimes more than in lots of other peoples', enough to make a novel or something. When people say, well, she really doesn't care much about plot, all they're doing is repeating what I said in my story. Plot is nothing. Plot is only movement in time. If you move in time you have a plot, if you don't move in time, you don't have a plot, you just have a stand-still, a painting maybe, or you have something else. But if you move in time you have a plot.

Your stories move around in time—almost Einsteinian time; there's long time and short time. Do you intentionally compress time and spread it out?

That's the way I think. I say it has to move in time but that doesn't mean it moves dead ahead in time. It can curl around on itself, it can just fall down and slip out through one of the spirals and go back again. That's the way I see. I see us all in a great big bathtub of time just swimming around; everything's in this ocean called time and it's a place.. ..

Going back to "A Conversation with My Father,"...

Well, actually the story's about a couple of things. It's about story telling, but it's also really about generational attitudes towards life, and it's about history. I tend not to look at things psychologically so much, but historically, I think. And for him, he was quite right, from his point of view. He came from a world where there was no choice, where you couldn't really decide to change careers when you were forty-one years old, you know. You couldn't decide to do things like that. Once you were a junkie, that was the end of everything. Once you were anything, that was it. Who you were was what you were. And she was speaking really from her own particular historical moment, and in another country besides, where things were more open. So it wasn't that she was giving some philosophical attitude, or some attitude close to her own optimistic disposition, although both of those things were true. That's also true, but she was also really (although neither of them knew it, only the writer knew this), they were really speaking from their own latitude and longitude, and from their own time in history when they spoke about these things. So that's really, I think, what was happening there. And her feeling which she talked about in terms of stones was pretty much exactly the same. I mean she really lives at a time when things have more open possibility, and for a group or a class that had more possibilities and a generation in that line, because he was an immigrant and he just about got here and did all right by the skin of his teeth So she was really speaking for people who had more open chances. And so she brought that into literature, because we just don't hop out of our tune so easy___

Did you ever look for women writers, in particular, or look to find your own experience in your reading?

No, not when I was very young. It's not so much that I looked for women writers, but I had sense enough to know that, like Henry Miller, he wasn'twritingforme. That's as far as I went. I knew that these guys, even the Beats—I thought they were nice, nice to see all those boys, and nice to see all the sexual feelings, but I knew it really wasn't written for me at all. It's not so much that I looked for women writers, as that I understood certain much admired writers, like Burroughs, weren'ttalk-ing to me. There was nothing to get from them. Though at the same time I did get stuff from Proust. That talked to me, but all those ballsy American heroes had nothing to say to me, though my friends thought they were just hot shit, excuse me ..

Do you consider yourself a feminist writer7

I'm a feminist and a writer. Whatever is in here comes from the facts of my life. To leave them out would be false. I do wnte a lot about women and the men they know. That's who the people are and what they think about....

Source: Grace Paley with Joan Lidoff, in an interview in Shenandoah, Vol. XXXII, No. 3,1981, pp 3-26

Adaptations

Enormous Changes at the Last Minute is a 1983 film based on the short story collection in which "A Conversation with My Father" appeared. The film was directed by Mirra Bank and stars Kevin Bacon, Ellen Barkin, and Maria Tucci. The script was written by John Sayles and Susan Rice.

An audiocassette from American Audio Prose Library, *Grace Paley Reads "A Conversation with My Father" and "Friends,*" was released in 1987.

Topics for Further Study

The narrator's attitudes and the events in her story-within-a-story reflect the mood of the early 1970s in the United States, particularly the issue of generational differences and the "generation gap." For example, the mother in the story wants to be part of "youth culture." Research youth culture in the 1960s and 1970s and compare your findings with the attitudes expressed by the narrator and the events recounted in her story.

Paley calls herself "a feminist and a writer " How are her feminist beliefs and concerns evident in this story?

Compare both stones within "A Conversation with My Father" with a short story by Anton Chekhov or Guy de Maupassant. How do the differences between their stories and Paley's relate to the different attitudes towards fiction expressed by the daughter and her father?

One topic of conversation within the story is tragedy Do you think "A Conversation with My Father" is a tragic story?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The Equal Rights Amendment, a proposal to change the constitution to guarantee women's rights, particularly equal pay for equal work, becomes a central issue of political debate.

1990s: Although efforts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment failed in 1982, women have earned greater political, social and cultural authority in the United States. In 1988, more than 56 percent of women held jobs. On the other hand, government guarantees of equal access and treatment to public and private occupations have increasingly been challenged in an era of shrinking government. For instance, in 1996, the largest university system in the country, the University of California, ended an affirmative action program for student admissions and faculty hiring.

1970s: The broadly based civil rights movement of the early 1960s gives way to the more radical politics of a younger generation of activists. The militant Black Power organizations fade from prominence when it is revealed that government agencies infiltrated and pursued the leaders of these groups.

1990s: The Nation of Islam claims millions of followers, and its leader, Louis Farrakhan, despite his controversial views, speaks to a gathering of hundreds of thousands of men at the Million Man March in Washington, DC, in 1995.

1970s: A full range of government guaranteed services to the poor, known as entitlements, are instituted to guarantee a minimum standard of living for all U. S. citizens, continuing reforms of the 1960s.

1996: President Clinton signs the Welfare Reform Bill, limiting recipients to five years of benefits and ending a federal guarantee of a sustainable income through the use of food stamps, medical assistance and cash grants.

1970s: Judges begin interpreting Civil Rights legislation as requiring full racial integration of public school systems. Many efforts to integrate schools result in violence.

1990s: Debates over the quality and equity of education continue. Many school districts remain segregated, despite twenty years of efforts at integration. New proposals for education reform include school choice, school vouchers, home schooling, charter schools, and a federal guarantee of access to higher education.

What Do I Read Next?

The themes of "A Conversation with My Father" also figure in the other pieces of short fiction in the collection in which the story was first published in 1974, Paley's *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*.

Metafiction, or fiction about writing fiction, was an innovative form in the 1970s, and Paley's fiction is part of this interest in experimentation. Another metafictional collection of short stories is Robert Coover's Pricksongs and Descants (1969).

Another feminist writer who published during the 1970s, Marge Piercy explores women's lives, patriarchal structures, and the Jewish-American experience in her novels and poetry. Small Changes (1973) and

Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) offer illuminating comparisons with Grace Paley's works.

Todd Gitlin's The Sixties is a cultural history written by a participant in the social upheavals of the decade.

Further Study

Aarons, Victoria, "A Perfect Marginality Public and Private Telling in the Stones of Grace Paley," in Studies in Short Fiction, Vol 27, No. 1, Winter, 1990, pp. 35-43

Aarons explores the development of identity and the precarious line between fiction and reality in Paley's stones Arcana, Judith. Grace Paley's Life Stories A Literary Biography, University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Arcana's work is a study of Paley's life and art She argues that "much of what Grace Paley asserts in her stones, as in political action, is the strength and force of individual character embodied in human presence."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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