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**The Shock of Unrecognition: Single-Girl Narrative in
Ann Beattie's Short Stories and "Postfeminist" TV
Shows**

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Theodore Dreiser's novel **Sister Carrie** presents a young woman who is single in the city: she is guided by self-interest, emotionally blank, fond of material things and willing to be a kept woman. Despite some diverging details, Ashley Nelson finds similarities between Dreiser's heroine and her namesake from the hit TV show "Sex and the City". Both women are "eager to explore the opportunities the city affords, they are ultimately skeptical that the domestic life, the married life, can satisfy their every need"^[1]. The single girl raises a few eyebrows, nowadays as well as in 1900: while Dreiser was accused of failing to place any moral judgment on Carrie's lifestyle, the authors of the series are criticised for casting the four women as overly sexual.

In its unique witty and provocative way, "Sex and the City" resurrects a historical and social type. The single girl is a loaded figure in American history, from Dreiser's Carrie to Capote's Holy Golightly, from the jazz age flappers to suffragists. She was missing from the popular culture in the 1980's, but reemerged in the last decade of the millennium as the postfeminist successful-but-tearing-apart woman came into the focus, portrayed either as frantic and fragile Ally McBeal in the TV show of the same name, or as frisky thirtysomethings in "Sex and the City". The so called "third wave" of the feminist movement, often termed postfeminism, is hardly a movement anymore with its strong depoliticisation of the feminist struggle and abandoning the "sisterhood is powerful" creed for the new politics of singledom - which has elevated from a humiliating status to the new freedom of choice.

Although equally present in the experimental narrative of Thomas Pynchon and the "dirty realism" of Raymond Carver, the single girl is most frequently portrayed by women writers. One of the highly acclaimed American novelists and short story writers Ann Beattie (1946) often describes the anxieties of single women – or women feeling single. With their double standards, observed in the fact that they struggle against singledom yet recognize its advantages, Beattie's female characters anticipate the Carrys and Allys of the nineties.

ANN BEATTIE: FEARING THE ROMANTIC QUEST

The course of Ann Beattie's career is more or less familiar to the devoted readers. She gained attention in the early 1970s with short stories in *The New Yorker* magazine, and became best known as ironic and witty chronicler of the upper-middle-class generation that came of age in the 1960s. In her later work, especially that beginning in the 1990s, she largely concentrates on the same generation of New Englanders –grown older, more ruminative, but not happier.

Beattie is called a compiler of trivia and a voice of the baby boomers, since she writes about the post-hippie generation's inability to cope with changes and risks in everyday life. Ranges of characters and situations in her short stories become more intriguing as we observe their

repetitiveness. The motives such as divorce, adultery and abortion recur, together with the inconspicuous symbolism of objects and rituals such as the poison ivy in the novel **Falling in Place** and the story *The Second Question*, or tweezing eyebrows to make eyes look bigger in **Falling in Place** and **Chilly Scenes of Winter**. In order to match her matter-of-factly focus upon banal details of contemporary popular culture, Ann Beattie has developed a style of short flat sentences and non-sequiturs. Her story-telling is fragmentary and economic, regularly lacking a central theme, consistent characterization and a clear time-scheme. Still, a careful craftsmanship, profound insight and emotional depth relate her to the masters of realism such as Jane Austen or Henry James: only that she uses much less than they do to say much more. Juxtaposition, montage effects and the prevalence of exposition connect Beattie's short stories to silver screen narratives more than her contemporaries who are keen on detailed descriptions and verbosity.

Beattie's storytelling shares with film narrative not only the effects such as short cuts, snapshots, or juggling with urban eccentricities and brand names, but also the strategies. Her subtle use of musical and visual leitmotifs as cues of her characters' state of mind is rare in contemporary fiction. The recurring song in the novel **Falling in Place**, Blondie's "Heart of Glass", signals the protagonists' emotional fragility, whereas "As Tears Go By" sung by the coarse voice of Marianne Faithfull which opens the novel **Another You** predicts the downfall of the main character. The importance of visual and musical cues for her characters may remind us of the "theme song" Ally McBeal needs to find for herself in order to gain her self-confidence, following the instructions of her therapist.

Loneliness is hitting hard upon Beattie's female characters even when they seem to be basking in bliss. Seemingly strong and composed, but fragile and vulnerable on the inside, they are trapped by their own indecisiveness and listlessness. Their quirky combination of inhibition and detachment have anticipated the single women featured in the high-rated TV shows such as "Sex and the City" and "Ally McBeal". Beattie's and the TV show characters reject the notions of sisterhood and collective values, more or less overtly. This could be taken as a thoroughly postfeminist attitude, were this hesitation to go with the flow less the matter of anxiety than the matter of choice.

The lives of Beattie's characters revolve around the inexplicable hesitation to pursue their goals. Unable to change, take risks and make sacrifices, they choose *status quo* resulting in lethargy and emotional stupor. Much like the eccentrics from "Ally McBeal" and "Sex and the City", Beattie's characters are obsessively attached to their dogs, plants, privileged objects or bizarre rituals, finding relief in bonding to non-human – that is, non-demanding - things. The most striking example is *Janus*, the story of a bowl becoming a lucky charm for its owner: the real estate agent Andrea got it from her ex-lover, and she keeps this exquisite object simply because she did not dare keep the relationship. After the break-up with her married lover, Rac from *The Second Question* starts taking care of a dying friend. She is on easier terms with death than with truth: when the pearl necklace of her lover's wife she was wearing broke during a sexual intercourse, Rac swallowed several pearls so that the necklace would not be the same length when restrung. She wanted to warn her rival of the imminent change: however, the message of "breaking bonds" did not get through. *The Second Question* and *Janus* demonstrate the importance of visual cues: while the bowl is represented as a Holy Grail of inexplicable power, the pearl necklace invokes the conflicting images of binding and bonding.

The story *Where You'll Find Me* is narrated by a nameless early-Bellocian "dangling woman" whose splendid isolation resembles McBeal's and Carrie Bradshaw's at least in the respect of sad ironic tone and quirky metaphors she uses to introduce herself:

Friends keep calling my broken arm a broken wing. It's the left arm, now folded against my chest and kept in place with a blue scarf sling that is knotted behind my neck, and it weighs too much ever to have been wing like. The accident happened when I ran for a bus. I tried to stop it from pulling away by shaking my shopping bags like maracas in the air, and that's when I slipped on the ice and went down.^[2]

After this telling image has seeped in, the character can use our knowledge of the episode and her acknowledged fear of balance to cast an ironic image of herself: "I am a thirty-eight-year-old woman, out of a job, on tenuous enough footing with her sometime lover that she can imagine crashing emotionally as easily as she did on the ice."^[3] As in the case of Ally McBeal, irony is never far from self-pity. While her seeming stronger and more energetic brother Howard helps

her to put her coat on, she feels helpless and vulnerable, invoking the initial metaphor again: she feels "like a bird with a cloth draped over its cage for the night. This makes me sorry for myself, and then I *do* think of my arm as a broken wing, and suddenly everything seems so sad that I feel my eyes well up with tears."^[4]

Encouraged by Howard to confide something in him as teenage girls do, this wounded bird tells of a romantic San Francisco episode. A man who kept gazing at her in a restaurant left his card in her hotel and several identical messages: "Who are you? Please call." She does not respond, but keeps the card. A couple of months later, she sends her photograph to the unknown admirer, leaving no return address. She equals her experience of sudden and inexplicable emotional intensity to a "bad movie", whereas passionate, impulsive and incurably romantic Howard asks her not to let the man slip away.

Whether for fear or indifference, she sticks to a non-romantic explanation: a "magic encounter" might not be more than a failed attempt to have a one-night stand. Still, on a summer day the feeling came over her that the man was thinking about her, so her chance for romance may not be lost. Thus singledom becomes a privileged position of manipulating the fantasy of others.

Howard's sister decides to keep the card of the man who is never going to find her. She prefers the suspension of the romantic encounter over the suspense of a secret love-affair, and her reluctance to take emotional risks seems good enough to wrap up the narrative. However, the story takes an unexpected turn: Howard confesses having a passionate affair with his friend's student. Seemingly more romantic than his sister, he turns out to be less responsible: the affair is bound to complicate his otherwise hectic life with the woman whom he met on a blind date and her children. Thus emerges a pattern of a reckless emotional behaviour disguised by romantic idealism, which casts a different light upon the life choices of Howard's sister. The focus of the narrative has suddenly moved from the discretion of the single girl to the failings of the partnership.

This change of focus is quite common in Beattie's stories, and the critics have noticed her narration of double intention: "Beattie's female speakers are telling stories with value, self-assertion, and closure. But they puzzle readers because they tell two stories at once: the open story of the objective, detailed present is juxtaposed with a closed story of the subjective past, a story the speaker tries hard not to tell."^[5] Whereas the narrators of *The Second Question* and *Janus* tell the stories of other people or inanimate objects in order to forget about their own loneliness, the experience of the female narrator in *Where You'll Find Me* serves as a backdrop for the story of her brother's emotional disorder. Beattie's single girls dread new commitments, but also the possibility of hurting other people. Passive and cowardly they may be, they act as responsible and mature persons.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH MCBEAL? THE FAILURE OF THE QUEST

The comedy-drama "Ally McBeal" was a success because it undermined the stereotype of a female attorney confronting the law and brought to the audience what has often been labeled as "a postfeminist role model" and "the icon of 90's feminism". Ally is presented as a modern career woman who can both enjoy the gains of feminism and the traditions of femininity but, owing to her flawed character, never actually does. Some views of the title characters were even inclined to take Ally as a depressing reminder of how much work the women's movement still has to do^[6]. So, what is actually the deal with Ally McBeal – is she the image of feminism becoming sexy and fragile, or an epitome of the feminism gone irrevocably futile?

The main character, superbly played by Calista Flockhart, is an intelligent lawyer who excels in the courtroom but her private life is a shambles. Her unsuccessful search for perfection makes her insecure and vulnerable, and increasingly neurotic and picky as the story of her romantic quest goes on. Ally's belief that her real life begins when she is married with children made her close to the thirty something female America, but her faltering both to escape the traditional gender roles and to reproduce them made the identification difficult. Her yearning for domestic felicity would seem utterly non-feminist if she were not constantly undermining her own efforts to achieve it. In the manner of Beattie's characters, Ally's aspirations constantly clash with her unwillingness to change and fear of commitment, and she is likewise doomed to loneliness.

However, this female melancholic can also be seen as a warning or even a threat. In her article *A Role Model We Can Live Without*, Kathleen J. Wu asks: “Does the main character have to be such a rotten role model for women, women lawyers and the little girls who aspire to be them?” [7]. Herself an accomplished lawyer, Wu fears that McBeal might become an endearing symbol of the single professional woman. The huge impact of the show may result, according to her, in the burgeoning of the ditzzy and fragile job-applicants who complain over their personal life and throw tantrums. The fear might be exaggerated, but the knowledge that television offers opposing clichés with nothing in between rationalizes it to an extent. Kathleen Wu points out that we are offered either “bubble-heads” such as McBeal, which prattle about men during their office hours, or “stone-faced” creatures who live solely for their jobs, like Dana Scully from “The X-files”.

The issue of the stereotypes is further complicated by the fact that women’s sexuality in the series is presented in an ambiguous and confusing manner. The women are objectified to a great extent, their sexuality colliding with their professional accomplishment. For instance, Ally’s roommate and bosom friend district attorney Renee is portrayed as a sexually aggressive “spider woman” in contrast to whom the quirky heroine appears to be a dutiful daughter of patriarchy. Renee is hypersexual on the verge of lascivious, wearing low cut suits, exposing her big breasts and flirting aggressively. On the other hand, Ally is thin and childlike, with nonexistent breasts and curves, using subtler ways both to attract men and win her cases. She is prone to such emotional outbursts, impulsive actions and erratic behaviour that Jennifer Pozner dismisses her as a “shallow” and “bratty” person with “high-school dating anxieties” [8]. The physical appearances even affect their relationship: the ample-breasted Renee is a mother figure to the fragile and insecure Ally, supporting her in her numerous crises and trying to bring her back to earth.

Ally’s romantic relationships are accordingly immature. Desperately trying to overcome the obsession with her now happily married old flame Billy, she goes through a series of disastrous commitments. Her attempt to date two men at the same time ends in a didactic plot device: the beaux turn out to be the father and the son. A seemingly soothing online affair almost ends in court, since Ally’s Internet date who sounded so mature turns out to be under age. Ally’s troublesome flights from the repulsive singledom into the stormy affairs serve to confirm Beattie’s dramatic insights in a more comical way: being single brings tranquillity.

The most frequent setting for “Ally McBeal” is the law firm “Cage and Fish”. However, very little work seems to be done, and the lawyer position of the title character at times seems to be nothing but “an outlet for her emotional turmoil and her sexual fantasy.” [9] The curious absence of competitiveness is unrealistic, but redeemed by the fact that the employees are a very tightly knit group which functions as a surrogate family.

Ally’s unhappiness and loneliness is both an outcome of her mental condition and a self-imposed attitude. She loves being weak and unhappy, and her singledom thus turns into a perfect excuse for a masochism of an exceedingly exhibitionistic kind. Regretfully, Ally’s feminism is more sheer narcissism than a life orientation, and her singledom more a curse or a character flaw than the matter of choice. While fragile and immature, Ally is best being on her own: her staying single in the end of the show proves the point.

“SEX AND THE CITY”: THE ROMANTIC QUEST IN THE AGE OF ROLE REVERSAL

“Sex and the City” demonstrates that a simple role reversal is enough for a “groundbreaking” representation of sex and sexuality. Women are presented as multidimensional, whereas men are objectified and rarely referred to by their real names. Still, such a “reversed” attitude (which relies heavily upon the literary tradition of stock characters) gives way to the romantic quest for Mr Right yet again.

In her text *What’s the Harm in Believing?* Joanna di Mattia suggests that the show repositions hegemonic masculinity and its heroes [10]. As living examples of the depoliticisation of the feminist movement, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha stand for the new female empowerment and the new politics of singledom. They chart a redefinition of the modern woman who chooses to remain unmarried, at least in the first four seasons of the show. By the series finale, all four have wound up in partnerships, and the fact raises questions about the ideologies running underwater: Ally’s pursuit of marital bliss turns out to be unsuccessful,

whereas the self-reliant foursome apparently renounce their singledom for the sake of romantic bonding. The respective endings were greatly determined by the external factors affecting script writers' choices: "The Sex and the City" was intentionally ended at the climax of the show's popularity, whereas "Ally McBeal" limped to its finale.

"Sex and the City" is yet another version of the traditional plot dealing with the single girl and the Prince Charming. The English and American literary tradition sets a specific trap for the independent woman: as in the case of Isabel Archer, she is given the opportunity to choose, and almost bound to take either the wrong path or the wrong man. The single girl in "Sex and the City" is offered two competing archetypes of masculinity: a romantic seducer in the tradition of the cruel Heathcliff or the saucy Rhett Butler, or a strong and sensitive "rescuer" in the manner of Edgar Linton or Casper Goodwood from Henry James's **The Portrait of a Lady**. Carrie Bradshaw is a modern Catherine Earnshaw, less violent and more sardonic, who passionately seeks to unite sexual excitement with loyalty, and her fantasies are projected upon Big and Aidan. Big is a Wall Street tycoon of social status and sexual prowess – both a "big love" and a "big trouble" for Carrie – while Aidan is strong and solid as the wood from which he makes furniture and just as reliable and down-to-earth as James's stubborn suitor. His rescue mission is to save Carrie from the devastating effects of romancing an emotionally impenetrable phallic hero.

"Sex and the City" is unique in portraying women who discuss and act toward men the way many men have long treated women. Although sexual behavior is a theme often discussed, the show is essentially about the loneliness in searching for intimacy, romance, and viable relationships. It fully belongs to the feminism's "third wave" – that is, to the postfeminist generation that has never lived in a world without the women's movement and justly claims feminism as its birthright. Postfeminism is focused on individualism, since the collectivity has already managed to fulfill the political goals and demands. It is aware of marriage's sordid social and economic history and there is no pressure to rush into tying the knot, since singlehood stops being equivalent to spinsterhood, a humiliating and dismal social and economical status. Marriage can even be repulsive, as seen in "Change of a Dress" (4:15), the episode in which Carrie reacts with nausea, panic attack and rash to the engagement ring, the wedding dress and the idea of marriage in general. The language and the pageantry of the wedding will be used in the fifth episode of the fifth season, "Plus One is the Loneliest Number", where the release of Carrie's book is described as the milestone event of her life.

Many aspects of the girls' lives are out of the picture: the viewer learns virtually nothing of their pre-Manhattan existences. A high-school sweetheart may emerge now and then only for the sake of confronting the past and the present. The biological families are rarely mentioned or seen, since they are replaced by "the family of friends" and made obliterate by the strong focus upon female solidarity. Whereas in "Ally McBeal" everything happens either in the office or in the courtroom, the fabulous four of the HBO's hit are rarely seen working. The setting of the series is classically picaresque, since the movement is favoured over fixity and public space to domesticity. Carrie and her friends seem to live exciting lives of constant hanging-out as a priceless perk of singledom. Still, they never take their status for granted. A great number of episodes address the pros and cons of single life, the institution of marriage and the romantic commitments in general. Although embracing their status, they search to settle, some of them winding up with partners inferior to themselves: marrying the loyal bartender or converting for the sake of the devoted Jewish husband is presented as a better solution than Ally McBeal's moving out of the city with her daughter. Whereas the lonesome Bostonian remains partnerless, simply trading her status of a single girl for the position of single mother, the four New Yorkers live to learn about the value of commitment.

The two TV shows share a common trait with Beattie's stories: these single-girl narratives are not of suspense but of suspension. On the surface, the female characters tell one story of objective present, but beneath it, they either struggle to come to terms with their emotional past (Ally's lifelong commitment to Billy) or to project their emotional future (Carrie's romantic obsession with Mr Big). Both "Ally McBeal" and "Sex and the City" portray independent women who fight their addiction to romantic concepts of love. Ally and Carrie both try to undermine their pursuit for happiness, either by erasing the Prince Charming's name – we waited till the final episode of the show to learn that Mr Big's first name was John! – or by succumbing to eccentric masochism.

In his article *The Shock of Unrecognition*, Anatol Broyard admitted that after reading Beattie's stories he felt "like a psychiatrist at the end of a hard day": "I would like to run out and hug the

first stodgy person I can find. I am beginning to feel like an alarmed ecologist of personality.”^[11]. TV shows about single women are also the case studies in the recognition of true female objectives.

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Notes

^[1] Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds), **Reading ‘Sex and the City’**, I. B. Tauris, London & New York, 2004, p 84.

^[2] Ann Beattie, **Where You’ll Find Me**, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1986, p. 185.

^[3] Beattie, p. 188.

^[4] Beattie, p. 194.

^[5] Susan Jaret McKinstry, *The Speaking Silence of Ann Beattie’s Voice*, Studies in Short Fiction, vol. 24, Spring 1987, no 2, pp. 111-112.

^[6] Jennifer L. Pozner “*And the Category Is...‘Simpering Wimps for \$1,000’*”. Vol. 24, Contemporary Women’s Issues Database. 01 September 1998, pp1+. Sojourner Feminist Institute, 1998.

^[7] Kathleen J. Wu, *A Role Model We Can Live Without* (available at www.akllp.com, accessed February 14th 2006).

^[8] Pozner, p. 3.

^[9] Michael M. Epstein, *Breaking the Celluloid Ceiling : Ally McBeal and Women Attorneys*, Television Quarterly, 1999, 28, p. 38.

^[10] Akass, p. 7.

^[11] Anatole Broyard, *The Shock of Unrecognition*, The New York Times, 24 August 1976, p. 27.



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