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"Grace Paley: A Contemporary Minimalist Writer"

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Abstract:

Minimalism refers to a style in literature characterized by simplicity. Minimalism as a literary technique has attracted the attention of writers in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, minimalism has become very popular in American literature. Among the most important minimalist writers are: Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Ernest Hemingway, Amy Hempell, Grace McCarthy. This paper traces the meaning and development of minimalism in literature as well as its common characteristics. It also examines how Grace Paley employs the minimalist technique in her work. The stories analyzed in this paper are: "Wants, " Mother, " and " A conversation with My Father".

Keywords: minimalism – technique – characteristics – contemporary minimalist writers.

Introduction:

The term "minimal" means something that is very small in amount or size. Minimalism refers to "a style or technique (as in music, literature, or design) that is characterized by extreme sparseness and simplicity" (Merriam – Webster, 2006, p. 674) .

The term "minimalism" was first applied in American literature in the 1960s. However, a number of prominent writers had already employed minimalist techniques in their works. Such prominent writers included Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Ernest Hemingway "all of whose conscious codes of omission were designed to make an audience feel more than they understood" (Hallett , 2000 P.12) . Cynthia Hallett adds , Chekhov's maxim that he must focus on the end of a short story and 'artfully' concentrate there an impression of total work , Joyce's minimal dependence on the traditional notion of plot, renouncing highly plotted stories in favor of seemingly static episodes and 'slices' of reality , Beckett's efforts ' to present the ultimate distillation of his inimitable world – view ... to compress and edulcorate [purify] traditional genres', and Hemingway's method of communicating complex emotional states by seemingly simple patterning of concrete detail, what he called the 'tip of the iceberg' effect (Hallett, 2000, p. 12).

In "Death in the Afternoon" , Hemingway describes his iceberg theory or "theory of omission " by saying that

"If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if he may omit things that he knows, if the writer is writing truly enough he will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them, The dignity of movement of the iceberg is due to only one – eighth of it being above water. The writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing" (Hemingway, Death in the afternoon, 2002, pp. 153-4). Emphasizing the significance of omission, Amy Hempel, a contemporary minimalist short story writer, states that: "A lot of times what's not reported in your work is more important than what actually appears on the page".

Frequently, the "emotional focus of the story is some underlying event that may not be described or even referred to in the story "(qtd. In Obendorf, 2009, p. 52). Furthermore, in an interview with Conway, Grace Paley, states that "because the world is a lot smaller, we don't have to do so much explaining. We can assume certain knowledge," (qtd . in Bach and Hall , 1997, p.6).

As a literary style. Minimalism is the same as the short story: "Both are compact, condensed, and contracted in design, both are especially dependent on figurative language and symbolic associations as channels for expanded meaning" (Hallett , 2000 , p, 4). However, there are certain characteristics common to minimalist fiction; Jermy R. Bailey highlights

what may be considered to be the most important elements of contemporary minimalist fiction:

- A) Simple, unadorned prose.
- b) Heavy dialogue with no exposition.
- C) First (sometimes second) person narration.
- D) Ambiguous (sometimes unreliable) narration.
- E) Present tense narration.
- F) Repetition of words, phrases or ideas.
- G) Informal, relatable and familiar tone.
- H) Generally domestic and "safe" setting.
- I) Stories generally include one or two simple, middle- class characters.
- j) Stories are contemporary and realistic, often dealing with common place subject matter.
- k) Textual omission / gaps are used to highlight main ideas to create ambiguity.
- l) Silence is used as a form of communication.
- m) Minimal action and plot.
- N) Stylistically sparse identifiers, etc. are often limited or omitted.
- o) Important action often takes place outside the story, or just prior to the beginning of the story.
- p) Open – ended conclusion (Baliey, 2010 , pp. 2–3) .

In minimalist fiction, the reader plays an active role Barthelme, emphasizing the importance of the reader , confirms that "you prefer to think you're leaving room for the readers, at least for the ones who like to use their imaginations, that you hope those readers hear the whispers, catch the feints and shadows, gather the traces, sense the pressure, and that meanwhile the prose tricks them into the drama ,and the drama breaks their hearts" (qtd. In Obendorf, 2009, p. 54). Kim Her zinger explains "the reader of minimalist fiction is being asked to face the characters in the story the way we face people in the world, people who do not [...] declare their personal histories , political and moral attitudes, or psychological conditions" (1985, p. 17). Thus, through using omission readers are invited to use their own understanding and experience to fill in the blanks Minimalist writers tend to focus only on the most important ideas expressed in the story, leaving out any unnecessary details. According to Hallett, "the tendency in literature is to evoke within a minimal frame some larger issue by means of figurative associations" (2000, p. 1).

This paper examines how Grace Paley chooses to employ the technique of minimalism in her work. Grace Paley (1922 – 2007) is an American author classified as a minimalist short story writer . She argues that "the short story form is marvelous and can do anything. It can be one page long, it can be forty pages" (qtd. in Bach and Hall, 1997, p. 22).

In an interview, Paley explains her view regarding 'Plot', she says, "everybody says I have no plot, which gets me really mad. Plot is nothing "

plot is simply time, a timeline . All our stories have timelines. One thing happens, then another thing happens. This is the way the story's going to go . In the next thirty pages or so, this will happen, this will happen , this will happen. That's what I meant" (Bach and Hall, 1997, p. 23). In another interview with Joan Lidoff, Paley asserts, "A story is for me the word 'conflict' is often used, and I don't really like that word, I think it's just a more simple dialectic than that. I think it's two events or two characters or two winds or two different ideas or whatever, bumping into each other, and what you hear, that's the story" (qtd. in Bach and Hall, 1997, p. 85).

Paley was one of the first women in America to write stories dealing with the ordinariness of lives of women. She dealt with important topics such as love, children, family life, divorce, and friendship. She copes with the emotional pain caused by an action that happened before the story begins. Paley's first collection of stories, *The little Disturbances of man*, appeared in 1959. This collection includes "Goodbye and Good Luck", "The contest " : " An interest in life " " A Woman Young and Old " and " " The Used – Boy Raisers " , The second collection , *Enormous Changes at the last Minute* , was published in 1974 includes some of the most important stories of Paley: "Wants ""Debts" "Faith in a tree" , "Samuel" and "A conversation with My father". Paley's third collection, *Later the same Day*, appeared in 1985 includes: "Mother", "Dreamer in a Dead Language", "Love", and "This is a story about my Friend, George, the Toy Inventor". In this paper, the researcher chooses three stories: "Wants", "Mother", and " A conversation with My Father " as archetypes of Paley's minimalist style.

The story " Wants " is narrated in the first person by a nameless female character , who at the beginning of the story , is returning two library books which are overdue for eighteen years. The story consists 794 words, and only three characters: the narrator , her ex-husband , and the librarian . In this story Grace Paley deals with a contemporary realistic issue, divorce. The action of divorce between the narrator and her ex-husband took place before the story begins.

Throughout the story , the narrator uses the pronoun " I " to reveal that the issue of her divorce from her ex-husband weighs heavily on her mind .The use of the pronoun " I" is used to reveal certain details related to her personality, which might have been the reason behind the failure of her marriage . At the beginning of the story , the narrator declares : " I don't argue when there's real disagreement " (Paley , 1974 , p.3) . In the next paragraphs, the narrator continues to deliver bits of information regarding her past life. Then she confesses to the reader that she wishes she has been married to one person only: either her ex-husband or her present one. It is at this point that the narrator begins to reveal the reasons why her previous marriage failed. In many ways, he said, "as I look back , I attribute the dissolution of our marriage to the fact that you never \invited the Bertram's to dinner". That's possible, I said. But really , if you remember : first my

father was sick that Friday , then the children were born , then I had those Tuesday- night meetings , then the war began . Then we didn't seem to know them any more. But you're right. I should have had them to dinner. (Paley , 1974 , P. 3 -4)

It is clear that the narrator has not been able to cope with the emotional pain caused by her divorce during the last 18 years. She has refused to acknowledge the fact that she got divorced from her first husband and is now married to another person. It is only this morning when she decides to return the books she has checked out 18 years ago she realizes that time has passed "Just this morning I looked out the window to watch the street for a while and saw that the little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born had come that day to the prime of their lives" (Paley , 1974 , P. 5 – 6). The growth of the sycamore tree symbolizes the passage of time. The tree may also suggest that the woman is now fully grown up and has to begin a new chapter in her life. In most minimalist works, the title of the story is important and carefully chosen. The word "want "means" to feel the need of , to desire earnestly " (Merriam – Webster , 2006 , P. 1173). In this story, the narrator has a desire to be a different person, she notes, "I want, for instance, to be a different person . I want to be the woman who brings these two books back in two weeks. I want to be the effective citizen who changes the school system and addresses the Board of Estimate on the troubles of this dear urban center" (Paley , 1974 , p .5) .

Paley uses simple, declarative sentences in her stories: "I saw my ex-husband in the street. I was sitting on the steps of the new library. Hello, my life, I said. We had once been married for twenty – seven years, so I felt justified. He said what? What life? No life of mine I said, O.K. I. doesn't argue when there's real disagreement". (Paley , 1974 , P.3) .

As shown in the above exchange, the conversation between the narrator and her ex-husband is short and to the point, direct, and often vague or understated. Ironically, the characters have much to say to each other, but communication between them turns out to be unproductive since they are different from each other. Paley omits punctuation in her stories. for instance, the following conversation between the narrator and her ex-husband: "That was when we were poor, I said. When were we ever rich? He asked. Oh, as time went on, as our responsibilities increased , we didn't go in need . You took adequate financial care, I reminded him". (Paley , 1974 , P.4). This exchange is an example of the minimalist style used throughout the story, where Paley intentionally omits conventional quotation marks that would suggest a conversation is taking place between characters. In the long sentences, Paley uses connecting words like "and", "or", in place of punctuation marks to keep the action moving . Examples include: " I got up and went into the library to see how much I owed them" (Paley, 1974, p. 3); " Just this morning I looked out the window to watch the

street for a while and saw that the little sycamores the city had dreamily planted a couple of years before the kids were born had come that day to the prime of their lives" (Paley , 1974 , P. 5 – 6)

Thus, the omission of commas, quotation marks and other forms of punctuation reflects the minimalist style that Paley employs in her stories. The word "want" is repeated several times throughout the story. But it has different connotations for the narrator and her ex-husband. While the wife wants her life back ("Hello my life"), the man wants to move on (" What? What life? No life of mine). It is clear that they have different personalities, needs, and interests. The differences between these two characters are best illustrated in the following exchange. "The children went to camp four weeks a year and in decent ponchos with sleeping bags and boots, just like everyone else. They looked very nice. Our place was warm in winter, and we had nice red pillows and things. I wanted a sailboat, he said. But you didn't want anything". (Paley, 1974, P. 4 -5). As shown in the above extract, the husband is a materialistic person. On the other hand, the woman needs nothing more than to lead a normal, settled life.

Like "Wants", the story, "Mother" is narrated by the first person by a female character. It has only three characters: the narrator, her mother, and father. The setting of the story is very domestic: the kitchen, the bedroom, and the living room. "Mother" consists 420 words. It revolves around a woman longing for her mother who died prior to the beginning of the story. The narrator begins the story saying: " One day I was listening to the AM radio, I heard a song:" Oh , I Long to see My Mother in the Doorway , " By God ! I said, I understand that song. I have often longed to see my mother in the doorway" (Paley , 1994 , P. 325) .

The title "Mother" suggests that there is a close relationship between the daughter and the mother. However, throughout the story, it is obvious that there has been a lack of closeness between them. The identity of the narrator as well as the mother is vague. The narrator refers to herself as "I" while she refers to her mother as "she" or "her". Their names are never given. Certain words are repeated several times in the story, like: "longed", "doorway" and "talk". The word "longed" means "to feel a strong desire or wish " (Merriam – Webster , 2006 , p. 628) . Thus, in this story , the repetition of the word "longed " implies that either the narrator truly misses her mother or there is a distance between the narrator and her mother . The word "doorway" means "a means of access " or " the opening that a door closes" (Merriam – Webster, 2006, P. 320). The fact that the mother always stands in the doorway of her daughter's room implies that she does not have the access to enter her daughter's room. This emphasizes the idea that there is a distance between the daughter and her mother. The same thing applies to the relationship between the mother and father. She always stood on the doorway of the living room. In other words, the woman is not permitted to

enter the lives of either her daughter or husband; she is not appreciated either as a mother or as a wife.

The word "talk" implies different connotations for the mother and father. For the mother, talking is a sign of communication, but for the father, talking is a burden.

Minimalist writers often use short, fragmented sentences in their works to focus only on the main ideas expressed by the narrator and characters. The first three paragraphs in "Mother" are followed by a line break in the text. This technique, is commonly used by minimalist writers to represent the passing of time. Immediately following the textual break, the narration continues, and then ends with another line break, suggesting the passage of time. The simple sentence, "then she died", constitutes a whole paragraph. It evokes no emotion. It is not clear whether the narrator is sad or indifferent regarding the death of her mother. It seems confusing as though we can feel from the tone that the narrator misses her mother, however, all the memories suggest that they were detached from each other. On one occasion, the narrator remembers, "she stood one day, just, so, at the front door, the darkness of the hallway behind her. It was New Year's Day. She said sadly, if you come home at 4 a.m. when you're seventeen, what time will you come home when you're twenty? She asked this question without humor or meanness". (Paley , 1994, p. 325). On another occasion, the narrator recalls, "another time she stood in the doorway of my room. I had just issued a political manifesto attacking the family's position on the Soviet Union. She said, Go to sleep for god sakes, you damn fool ,you and your communist ideas . We saw them already, Papa and me, in 1905 . We guessed it all". (Paley, 1994, P. 325). The final paragraphs show that there is a lack of compassion between the parents. They have different interests. The narrator says, "She stood there a minute. Then she sat beside him. They owned an expensive record player. They were listening to Bach. . She said to him, Talk to me a little. We don't talk so much anymore. I'm tired, he said. Can't you see? I saw maybe thirty people today. All sick, all talk talk, talk, talk. Listen to the music; he said I believe you once had perfect pitch. I'm tired, he said" (Paley, 1994 , p. 326). Information is repeated, but is not revealed. Paley ends the story without providing the reasons; the narrator and her mother are not close to each other. This leaves the reader with more questions than answers.

In "A conversation with My Father," Grace Paley discusses fiction and offers her opinions regarding plot. In this story, Paley rebels against the inevitability of plot. She believes that a story should not be limited to a predetermined end. On the contrary, the story should be open – ended, full of possibilities. A conversation with my father" revolves around two characters only, the narrator and her father. The father asks her to write a simple, plain story, "I would like you to write a simple story just once more, the kind you used to write, just recognizable people, and then write down

what happened to them next" (Paley , 1994 , p. 232). The narrator refuses to write such a conventional story with an end, she believes that putting an end to her story just "takes all hope away". She adds, "Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (Paley, 1994, p. 232). In an attempt to please her father, the narrator writes a very short story with no action or ending, it involves a mother and her drug- addict son. However, the father is not pleased, because he feels his daughter has left out important details: "You know there's a lot more. You know that. You left everything out. There are in fact Russian writers you never heard of, you don't have an inkling of as good as anyone , who can write a plain ordinary story , who would not leave out what you have left out . I object not to facts but to people sitting talking senselessly, voices from who knows where ..." (Paley, 1994, P. 233)

Thus, the narrator agrees to write a second version of the story, in which she attempts to fill in the details which her father believes are important. In this second version, the mother becomes a drug- addict herself in order to bond with her son, but her son deserts her, and she is left alone.

This time the story is longer, and has an ending. Though she inserts more details in this version, she intends to leave out the most important information. Still, her father is not pleased as he feels his daughter has left the heroine alone. He believes that it is a pity to end the life of a person in such a way (Paley, 1994, p. 237). The father knows that life is a tragedy, that's why he is interested more in details of life than in the end of the story "I suppose that means she was alone, she was left like that, his mother . Alone. Probably sick?" (Paley, 1994, p. 236).

At this point the narrator tries to explain the reason why she meant in the first version to leave out specific details in the story: "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. She could change". Instead of putting an end to her story, the writer prefers to leave all options open. The writer refuses to leave her protagonist like that: "I'm sorry for her. I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying".

Therefore, she did change. Of course her son never came home again. But right now, "she's the receptionist in a storefront community clinic in the East Village" (Paley, 1994 , p. 238).

Like any minimalist story, the narrator rarely says all what she wants to say, but meaning is always waiting to be found just below the surface. This proves that if the reader is willing to exert effort to find the deep meaning in a work, the writer does not need to provide all the details to write a successful story.

Paley's sort stories espouse a quintessentially feminine, at times feminist perspective. Moreover, the bouncy voices and the budding themes in her short stories signal, in hindsight, the thematic and formal concerns that characterize Paley's literary genre. Philip Roth was one of Paley's first reviewers. "Splendidly comic and unladylike" says the blurb he signed on

the cover of *The Little Disturbances of Man*. Roth alluded to his kinship with Paley's "bouncy style" (Reading Myself and others, 1977, p. 120), to her reliance on spoken language, her ear for accents and turns of phrase as well as her "attempt to incorporate into American literary prose the rhythms, nuances and emphases of urban and immigrant speech", (Roth, 1977, p. 120). Roth refers to Paley as "genuine writer of prose, writing in a language of new and rich emotional subtleties, with a kind of backhanded charm and irony all its own". He ascribes the particular "illusion of intimacy and spontaneity [in her short stories] to her inventing a whole new idea of what "being yourself" sounds and looks like" (Roth, 1977, p. 120).

Even though Paley's narrative voices and themes grow more diverse in her subsequent short stories, the unique voice audible (The Loudest Voice) - one that would render her prose forever recognizable- as well as her deceptively simple, transparent style, make her stories possibly the best entrance into the author's liminal fictional universe, posed between the old world and the new, between the old language (Yiddish) and the new one, American English. Paley's genius is to evoke the phenomenological qualities of the oral by means of the written, often through deliberate grammatical irregularities, sparseness that foreground the differences between written and speech standards. This is heard in the titles of Paley's stories: "Conversation with My Father", "The loudest Voice". Paley makes voice the very topic of her stories, perhaps because taking, remembering stories, be they from one's childhood or from other sources. In a sense, Paley's stories are a never-ending conversation which the author interrupts, almost haphazardly, only to take it up again, changing the setting, sometimes the characters. Many of Paley's stories start with talk or intimate dialogue, so much so that even everyday objects can become interlocutors in her talkative universe. Indeed, in the often-quoted opening lines of "The Loudest Voice", the aural/oral worlds are filled with noisy sounds, and mind an matter collapse: "There is a certain place where dumbwaiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street shut up, go skate somewhere else, come home". In Paley's universe, talk is vitality, life itself.

Grace Paley employs many of the characteristics of minimalism in her work. Her stories are short. They are usually narrated, in first person, by a female protagonist, who has suffered an emotional pain prior to the beginning of the story. Paley's stories are built on talk, on direct face-to-face conversation between people rather than third-person narration or wordless incident. She tends to leave out important details in her stories a technique which invites the reader to participate in the story, her stories are open – ended , leaving all interpretations.

Paley's short stories portray moments of existential awareness experienced during childhood, acts of compliance or rebellion-past and present form an intricate web; the firely-woven tapestry of her stories is the graphic representation of a community striving to embrace differences, be they religious, ethnic, or social.

الملخص**غريس بالي: كاتبة اختزالية معاصرة
عبد الاله النهار**

يشير مصطلح الاختزال إلى أسلوب أدبي يتميز بالبساطة، وقد اجتذب الاختزال كأسلوب أدبي لفت انتباه الكتاب في فترتي سبعينات وثمانينات القرن الماضي، ومنذ ذلك الحين، انتشر أسلوب الاختزال بصورة كبيرة في الأدب الأمريكي، ومن أشهر الكتاب الاختزاليين: ريموند كارفر، أن بيتي، أرنست همنغواي، ميللر، أمي همبل، غريس بيلي، طوبياس وولف، فريدي بارثليم، وكورمماك مكارثي.

يتتبع معني الاختزال وتطوره في الأدب علاوة أهم سماته كما ينظر مليا في كيفية توظيفة من قبل غريس بالي لفن الاختزال في أعمالها القصصية ومن القصص تم تناولها من خلال هذه التقنية: "الاحتياجات"، و "أم" و "حديث مع أبي".

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