

Overwhelmed, Unhappy, and Disconnected
Women and Higher Education in Contemporary Short Fiction
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Introduction

A surge of short fiction depicting women's relationship with academia during and after college occurred in the mid-2010s. Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person" (2017), which explores college through the student's perspective, received significant attention in the popular media. Mary Gordon's "Ugly," Kyle McCarthy's "Ancient Rome," Deb Olin Unferth's "Wait Till You See Me Dance," and Curtis Sittenfeld's "Gender Studies," published in the same year, also address women's experiences with education. The year before saw the release of Karin Lin-Greensberg's "Since Vincent Left" which deals with an unhappy college professor. In 2015 Susan McCullum-Smith published "The Outlier" which explores similar themes as "Cat Person." All of these stories try to determine why the relationship between women and education often results in the woman's unhappiness.

The subgenre of literature exploring women's education traces back to the biblical Eve, whose longing for greater knowledge leads her to eat fruit from the forbidden tree. This early example illustrates the negativity often associated with women who long for more knowledge and those who have attained high levels of education. Throughout history women struggled to earn the right to an education and faced backlash for desiring knowledge. Educational opportunities afforded to men have rarely been afforded to their female counterparts, an issue that persisted well into the twentieth century and even to this day. In the twentieth century authors like Virginia Woolf attempted to navigate the relationship between women and education in pieces like "A Room of One's Own." Here Woolf tells the fictional tale of Judith Shakespeare, who "was not sent to school... [and] had no chance of learning grammar and logic" even though

she was just as eager and able as William (Woolf 39). Therein lies a prime example of women not being given the same opportunities as males.

Various forms of literature have been used to document how women's relationship with education has evolved over the years. Novels, poetry, and short stories have all had their turn as the form of choice for female authors to write about their experience and each form has something valuable to add to the conversation. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first women to write about women's rights in English, specifically their right to an education. Authors like Jane Austen and Emily Brontë utilized educated women in their novels to reveal the result of education on both societal standing and happiness. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Maya Angelou are poets who all engaged with what it meant to be an educated woman in a male dominated society. All of these authors and literary forms paved the way for modern fiction exploring women's relationship to education.

Within this thesis, the focus will be on the short story. This is in part due to the recent increase in the accessibility of the short story. A simple Google search will pull up thousands of short stories that modern readers can explore with ease. Secondly, the shorter form entices many individuals who might not sit down to read an entire novel or be intimidated by poetic language. Part of the reason readers might turn to short stories over novels is due to a "restrained process of cognition" that is natural for humans to experience. Events of a novel are harder to remember than those of a short story due to the sheer amount of information that humans need to recall (Patea 19). Instead, the "short form renders perception in a mode close to the way in which" humans actually experience life (Patea 19). Important moments are recalled with greater specificity and intensity, something seen in the short story. The short story form allows the female authors studied within this thesis to show snapshots of their interactions with education.

Therefore, the “glimpse” effect reduces the tendency of these stories to be generalized, making it easier for readers to remember.

Due to how recently many of these stories were published, few of them have received much criticism or been widely anthologized. However, “Ugly” by Mary Gordon, “Ancient Rome” by Kyle McCarthy, and “Gender Studies” by Curtis Sittenfeld all earned coveted places in *The Best American Short Stories 2017*. “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian received unprecedented attention in the popular media. “Since Vincent Left” by Karin Lin-Greensberg, “Wait Until You See Me Dance” by Deb Olin Unferth, and “Outlier” by Susan McCullum-Smith were all published in reputable literary journals. Each of these stories directly relates to the theme of education and the unhappiness felt by women with an educational background.

To understand the proliferation of stories exploring this idea in the 2010s, it is helpful to look at some prominent examples of earlier short fiction in this genre. Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” (1955) explored the idea of the body limiting one’s ability to put their education to fulfilling use. Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1977) directly compares the lives of two sisters and their futures, one with an education and one without. In her stories “Community Life” (1998) and “Agnes of Iowa” (1998), Lorrie Moore reveals how the increased career opportunities for women at the end of the 20th century did not actually give women more freedom but rather forced them to uphold even more demanding societal standards.

When one considers these canonical works in relation to those written since 2015, a clear distinction emerges in terms of themes, style of narration, and character development. Women in the earlier works are more limited in what they can accomplish with their education, leading to their personal growth throughout the stories being restricted. In comparison, many of the women from the fiction of the 2010’s experience some form of growth throughout the story.

This thesis will focus primarily on the analysis of short fiction published between 2015 and 2017. Analysis of earlier works will be used to trace the historical progression of the genre and document the increasing pressure for women to “have it all.” The forms that this pressure takes vary over time, but the resulting unhappiness is tragically timeless. All of the short stories, no matter when they were written, seek to reveal (1) how education level affects women’s lives both positively and negatively and (2) why education can make such a drastic impact. In early works, women are distinguished solely based on their intellectual ability as seen through their education. In the fiction published after 2015, the idea that women must have both beauty and intelligence to be successful, adds an additional complication to the women’s lives, ultimately leading to a decreased sense of autonomy, or self-governance. The stories within this thesis critique the societal pressures placed on women that limit their autonomy and happiness.

Problems that arise with increased levels of education often stem from the idea that women need to “have it all” in order to be successful and happy, a modern idea that leads to misery. The idea of “having it all” was introduced in 1982 by Helen Gurley Brown when it was printed on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine; it has been “a burden and a cliché ever since it was printed in red on the cover” according to Jennifer Szalai, author of the *New York Times* piece “The Complicated Origins of ‘Having it All’”. Within *Cosmopolitan*, Brown said “Don’t use men to get what you want in life – get it for yourself,” and encouraged women to make their own paths, instead of following others (qtd. Hughes). Her advice was meant to be uplifting and a reminder that women have the ability to function and be successful without the aid of a man. Brown celebrated the opportunities for women to flourish both at home and at work, but unfortunately, those opportunities turned into an unescapable pressure to do everything right and

do it by themselves . Simply because women *could* do it did not mean that they *had* to, but many women took it that way.

With the rise of white and middle-class feminist ideas, women were expected to be able to maintain perfect work-life balances and be content in all areas of their lives. Brown encouraged women to have careers outside of the home and also take care of all the daily tasks that are so often passed off to the women, including childcare, household cleaning, and cooking. If women felt discontentment, they were doing something wrong. The professor protagonist from Lin-Greensberg's "Since Vincent Left," remarks that women can "only realistically expect to be happy with two prongs of [their] life at any one point" (Lin-Greensburg 83). The three prongs she refers to are work, personal life, and home life. The unfortunate reality is that the statement actually holds true in most of the stories mentioned. Women featured in these stories are unhappy with at least two out of the three "prongs," if not all three.

With magazines targeted at women publishing articles about the chaos that results from balancing work and home, it is no wonder these stories often depict a fractured sense of self. Today the phrase "having it all" "has come to carry with it a sense of being overwhelmed" and unable to find contentment, let alone happiness, in any aspect of life (Szalai). Indeed, the stories published after 2015 show why women's efforts to "have it all" actually detract from their happiness by limiting their autonomy and sense of control.

In all of these stories, educated women are exceptionally unhappy with their lives. Shared traits emerge among them. They all have aspirations and dreams, yet ones that go unrealized. Many of them must constantly oppose a dominating male, one who often has more power than they do. They all lack either the opportunities or the skills to engage meaningfully with others in social situations, yet most importantly they lack autonomy. None of them feel as if they have any

semblance of control over their own decisions. All of them go about attempting to reclaim their autonomy, though in different ways, each hopeful that her attempt will lead to a renewed sense of self and satisfaction. Unfortunately, most of the women within these short stories fail, leaving the reader with a bleak view of the prospects for educated women.

Women and Higher Education in O'Connor, Walker, and Moore

Literature about women and their academic endeavors began to evolve drastically during the twentieth century and continues to evolve to this day. Through looking at the historical precedents of the genre I will explore how authors like Flannery O'Connor, Lorrie Moore, and Alice Walker portrayed women with educational backgrounds and how those women were often ostracized from their peers as a result of their education. Then I will look at fiction published following 2015 to see how contemporary concepts and beliefs have perpetuated and even exacerbated negative associations of women with intelligence. Ultimately these negative associations are one of many reasons explored in this thesis as to why women in modern stories struggle to thrive.

In the widely anthologized "Good Country People," education separates the main character, Joy, from the world. The misery felt by Joy, who changes her name to Hulga, bleeds into every aspect of her life and limits who and how she interacts with others. Even though she is incredibly intelligent and earned a Ph.D., she cannot connect with people and has no meaningful relationships in her life, excluding her mother. When a Bible salesman named Manley attempts to sell Hulga's mother a Bible, he meets Hulga and becomes entranced by her uniqueness. In an uncharacteristic moment, Hulga agrees to meet up with him. Manley coerces Hulga to remove her prosthetic limb after confessing his love and kissing her, leaving her feeling incredibly vulnerable. He then reveals himself as a fraud, deserting Hulga in the loft of the barn as he

retreats with her leg. Even with her educational background, Hulga still falls prey to Manley's trap, showing that education does not always equate to intelligence.

Skipping ahead in time, "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker looks at how education impacts autonomy through the differences in jobs afforded to those with education. A woman prepares for one of her daughters, Dee, to come home. The second daughter, named Maggie, never left home in part due to extreme shyness and in part due to the burns that cover her body, a result of a housefire in her childhood. Maggie did not receive much education, whereas Dee "has left the family's rural and impoverished state in pursuit of a college education, and she returns with a strong appreciation for African heritage" (Sarnoski 274). Dee returns with a Muslim man who does not fit in with the already disconnected family and begins claiming various family heirlooms for herself, including a butter churn and quilts meant for Maggie. Maggie timidly offers Dee the quilts, always used to getting second best in relation to her well educated, beautiful sister. Yet the mother protests and takes the quilts back for Maggie. Dee retaliates by saying that neither woman understands their heritage before leaving in a huff. Her education makes her "remarkably distant - economically, psychologically - from her closest connections to that heritage: her immediate family" (Sarnoski 275). Distance and the breakdown in communication within the family reveal some of the hardships faced by learned women.

Similarly, the theme of potential risks that women with educated backgrounds face gets depicted in Lorrie Moore's collection *Birds of America*. Within the collection, Moore illustrates multiple female characters working in or around academia. In "Community Life" (1998) Olena failed to "warm to the graduate study" of English so instead transfers to studying library sciences (Moore 58). Her educational background, coupled with the fact that she is an immigrant from Transylvania, separate her from the community and those around her. This ultimately leads to a

failed relationship and questions about her identity. Olena loses autonomy over her name, her body, and also her job leaving her trapped in an unhappy life. Agnes from “Agnes of Iowa” (1998) attempts to live an adventurous life in New York City but returns to Iowa and gets married after failing to thrive in the big city. A childless and passionless relationship coupled with an unsatisfactory job teaching “the Great Books Class” leaves her wanting more in life but never brave enough to actually change her existence (Moore 81). She too finds herself limited by her given name and unable to find passion in her job, where she suffers under a domineering male authority. Moore has been credited with a talent for “picking apart the complex and very particular dynamics of American failure” especially in terms of how educational background impacts ideas of success according to Emma Brockes, a writer for *The Guardian*. This can be seen through the complex power struggles that Moore creates between those with an educated background and those without.

Women and Higher Education in Short Fiction of Today

The Student Experience

Kristen Roupenian’s “Cat Person” (2017) sparked major discussions about women’s experiences during college. Her story received massive attention in the media, partially due to its relevance to the #MeToo movement. *The New Yorker* interviewed her and a Twitter page was created called “Men React to Cat Person,” which gained substantial followers. “Cat Person” became “a viral sensation” according to Anna Silman, a Senior Culture Writer for *The Cut*. Roupenian’s story features a young college student named Margot who meets an older man named Robert while working at a hip movie theatre. Through repeated exposure the two become friends and craft an intricate relationship through text. Yet when the two of them actually go on their first date, awkwardness ensues as demeaning jokes and belittling comments targeted at Margot are made. The two eventually go back to Robert’s place and have sex, an encounter that

Margot wishes she could have stopped. Intervention through text by a friend of Margot ends the relationship until the two run into each other months later at a bar. That night, Robert texts Margot continually beginning with friendly comments, asking her to take him back, and ending in an accusatory, spiteful moment where he calls her “whore.” Roupenian’s clever title, her depictions of texting and the breakdown of communication that often results from texting, as well as a heartbreaking ending show the social pressures forced on women to first and foremost please the men in their lives and then engage in learning. Education also does not matter to Margot as much as her social life, a theme common among these stories.

Susan McCullum-Smith also depicts societal pressures placed on women in education in her story “The Outlier” (2015). An unnamed narrator experiments on her roommate, wanting to see how far she can push someone before they lose their mind. She begins to take things from her room but leaves a “replacement- always close to the original with a little twist of difference” (270). What starts as a desire to see if people pay attention to the mundane things around them soon reveals a desire felt by all the women in the story to be extraordinary in a world that thinks they are all ordinary. None of the characters achieve their hopes, ending up in places that are far cries from their university studies. McCullum-Smith utilizes cell phones in her story in order to show how technology has changed how young women learn and interact with their peers. Analysis of her nameless narrator, her focus on technology and the lack of detail surrounding the characters’ actual schooling leave the reader with the feeling that education can only serve to separate women from each other.

Women in the Workforce

Women’s relationship with education does not end once they leave college. Some of the stories explore women after they have left college and entered into unfulfilling careers, often

ones that do not correlate to the education they received. In Mary Gordon's "Ugly" (2017) a young woman named Laura works in Human Resources after failing to complete her English Ph.D. While greatly valued in the company for her ability to communicate with all sorts of people and resolve conflict, her job does not satisfy her. When she is asked to travel to Monroe, Missouri, a drastically different environment than New York City, she meets Lois, an eccentric old woman who runs her own antique store. Stuck in a small town and away from her boyfriend, Hugh, Laura longs for a single beautiful thing to give her existence meaning. She finds a "small, graceful chair" (Gordon 132). Bringing it back to her work issued apartment opens a door, allowing her to rediscover the passion she had for beauty. As she simplifies her life by moving into Lois' spare apartment and buying modest, yet beautiful pieces of furniture, she learns to love her life and thrive. A complete transformation occurs within her. Yet as soon as her boyfriend comes to pick her up from her stint in Monroe, she changes back to the person she was in New York, leaving her beloved chair behind. Without her boyfriend present, Laura was able to reconnect with her love of literature and language through her engagement with the beautiful things that she surrounds herself with. Through showing the power struggle between a liberal arts education and that of an architect, Gordon shows the role that education plays in determining happiness. In the end, Laura's love of literature, brought about by her education, gets relegated to last place in order to appease those around her and to uphold standard notions of success.

The sexualization of the female body starting at a young age and a nameless narrator are featured in Kyle McCarthy's "Ancient Rome" (2017), which also focuses on a woman who studied English. Unlike Gordon's Laura, McCarthy's protagonist graduated but now works as a tutor for a spoiled teenage girl. The teenager, named Isabel, struggles to write a paper about slave women in the Roman empire. As the narrator tutors Isabel, she wonders how her Harvard

education led to an unfulfilling job. The narrator's "smash success,"—writing a play about the biblical Eve killing Adam and travelling through time to counsel a heroin addict—does not predict her future success (McCarthy 194). The story ends with a candid discussion over what it means to do feminist work and the realization that the narrator's entire life could be considered a feminist work, which is completely lost on young Isabel. With no prospective jobs in line after earning a Harvard degree, the narrator questions whether education pushed her to succeed or kept her from flying.

Through the Professor's Eyes

Some women never leave academia, choosing to stay on college campuses in the role of professor. When looking at fiction that addresses professor's perspective, a large discrepancy between male and female professors exist in the literature. The 1940's introduced the campus novel, a genre that featured stories told mainly from the perspective of male professors and students. David Lodge gets credited as the father of this genre due to his massive influences on the genre. Beginning in 1960 he published over 15 fictional stories about college life, many of them satirical in nature. However, he was not the only well-known author within the genre. Indeed, countless authors, including Stephen King and Kurt Vonnegut, wrote about the college experience- but typically from the male perspective. While a large literary canon of well recognized authors exists within this genre, the experiences that they described focuses mainly on the male, giving little to no thought about the female perspective. Christopher Findeisen argues in his article "The One Place Where Money Makes No Difference: The Campus Novel from Stover at Yale through *The Art of Fielding*" that "the society from which the campus novel emerged has changed radically, the conventions through which the campus novel defines itself have not" (Findeisen 69). This can be seen through the overabundance of campus novels that

feature male professors, not female ones. Many of the campus novels also focus on romantic relationships with a woman, one who is not focused on obtaining an education. Very few pieces portray women as anything more than a body or a lovesick creature.

Critiques of the campus novel focused on the how male experiences are inappropriately universalized and how elitist the pieces often seemed. John McNally argues that “just because the subject is inherently insular doesn’t mean that a novel that examines the subject can’t achieve some universality” (McNally 4). While the campus novel does suffer from ignoring the differing experiences of males and females, modern short stories attempt to highlight women’s experiences. In comparison with the campus novel, the short stories under consideration in this thesis focus on the unique individual experiences of educated women. All women in these short stories, whether they are student, professor, or are working in the real world after attending college, suffer from immense dissatisfaction brought about in large by their educational level.

The interplay between social relationships and education is explored in “Since Vincent Left” (2016) by Karen Lin-Greensburg, as she attempts to define the relationship between students and professors. Professor Amy Miller just lost her husband to divorce and must rediscover who she is without him when her boss asks her to take two students to a conference, one where she must pay for everything out of her own pocket and hope to be reimbursed by the school. The two students who go on the trip are the overly ambitious Morgan who has countless majors and minors and her polar opposite, a boy named Bennett. After a night of wandering the dark forest on a self-made scavenger hunt and drinking too much boxed wine, Amy realizes how alone and unhappy she truly is and finally says to Morgan the words that might have saved her marriage. “I’m sorry” (Lin-Greensburg 94). Lin-Greensburg proposes the idea of censorship as a deceptive form of communication. She also engages with the pressure placed upon female

college students to live up to expectations that often leaves women feeling overwhelmed and alone.

Deb Olin Unferth explores the power of names as a means to self-definition and depicts an unhappy professor with an overly demanding job in “Wait Till you See me Dance” (2017). A professor, incorrectly called Mary by the department secretary, teaches a remedial English course and begins to fall in love with a student from an unnamed foreign country who is studying music and avoiding a civil war in his own country. Through him, she begins to find passion in life and attempts to become a better teacher to help him pass the class, all in the hopes that it will keep him in the country. Yet the final paper, which will determine if he stays or goes, is graded by “an outside source” or someone else within the department (Unferth 21). This makes Mary seek a friendship with one of the secretaries in the department, who gets to choose the outside source. In an attempt at friendship, Mary agrees to drive the secretary to an Indian dance, which goes awry and ends in her contemplating murder and leaving the secretary stuck in a dirt hole before ultimately coming back and taking her to the dance. In the end, the boy gets to stay but Mary loses her job. Education does little to aid Mary in her attempts at finding happiness.

Curtis Sittenfeld illustrates the inner life of a female professor in her story “Gender Studies” (2017). Although never officially married, Nell loved and lived with Henry for eleven years before he left her for a younger graduate student, leaving Nell unsure of where she fits in the world. After traveling to a conference and losing her ID, she calls upon Luke, the shuttle driver, who chauffeured her from the airport to her hotel, for help. Although Luke is an attractive man, Nell feels no real attraction toward him and is even disgusted with him from an ideological standpoint. She just wants him to give her ID, which she thinks that he has. He insists on drinks first which eventually leads to a kiss and intimacy, something she longs for; yet ,he ruins the

moment after he comments on her bikini line. When she demands her ID, he admits that he never had it and suggests that perhaps she “didn’t really lose it” (264). The encounter unsettles her and leaves her in a state of confusion, which only increases when she finds her ID in her jacket pocket. After the conference, she finds another man, one who does not comment on whether or not she needs to conform to traditional standards of beauty. Yet the new relationship does not completely fulfill her and she thinks back on her encounter with Luke often. Sittenfeld explores how modern technology, namely cell phones, allow for faster communication but communication that is not always clear. Along with a focus on physical sexuality, Sittenfeld illustrates some of the many reasons why educated women struggle to make lasting interpersonal connections.

The Commonalities

Many of the stories deal with the dissatisfaction that educated women encounter in their personal lives, specifically lost or unrequited love. This stems from challenges that arise in interpersonal relationships when a difference in educational level exists between the two parties. While stories of unrequited love are not unique to the genre, the fact that women attempt to use interpersonal relationships to gain control and contentment in life does stand out.

Women with increased levels of education in these stories desire greater autonomy in their lives, and they attempt to gain back control in a variety of ways. Each woman in these stories faces challenges that stem from names and labels given to women. Given names limit women and the future that they can see for themselves, but more importantly reveal a separation between these women and their peers. The women attempt to redefine and use their sexuality and bodies in order to take back control and physically connect with others. Breakdowns in communication further separate the women from those around them, isolating them in worlds of

their own creation. Their jobs demand perfection; yet, they do not fulfill them due to domineering bosses, limited opportunities for growth or lack of mental stimulation. Much of the suffering and misery faced by these women results from their educational background.

Names as Identity

Names hold power and play a vital role in determining one's identity. Many of the women in the stories under consideration have suffered a fissure in autonomy due to their increased levels of education. The women then experience difficulty relating with the people in their lives and achieving their goals as a result of their education. They attempt to regain a sense of autonomy, or control over their own self-governance but generally fail. Not every name in every story holds a deep meaning, but many of the situations faced by women in these stories can be related back to the importance of individual agency and self-governance that stems from the power of their given names. The earlier fiction focuses on the central role of names in defining identity and specifically the attempts characters make to change their names. In fiction after 2015, characters are often nameless or wrestling with the meanings of their names and the subsequent identities that are forced upon them.

Helen Morton's "What's in a Name?" reminds readers that a "vast literature on naming" exists in a multitude of contexts spanning from the psychological impacts of names to the historical contexts associated with certain names (Morton 67). A sense of "magic and potency can be attached to a name" that "becomes a fundamental part of [one's] identity" (Morton 67). All of the authors writing before 2015 examine characters who attempt to change their name or at the very least the pronunciation of their name. Some are more successful than others in the public adoption of the change, but all of them change it due to societal pressures and expectations that they no longer wish to uphold. Hulga from "Good Country People" legally

changes her name to take back control, whereas Dee from “Everyday Use” changes it as a commentary on oppression. Moore’s characters struggle with the worth and meaning attached to their names and attempt to change the associations connected to their name that serve only to limit their abilities.

Most people do not get to choose their own names; they are given to us at birth. Even nicknames “are usually imposed... by others” (Morton 67). Does the act of naming someone take away their autonomy? At a base level the answer is no. Infants cannot name themselves, so parents provide a name in order to give them a sense of identity from birth that the child can develop over time. Due to the nature of names in having a powerful influence over self-governance and identity, they can become a cage that traps women, either by specifying what kind of person they should be or how they should appear to others. Within these stories, women rebel against the societal expectations and restraints placed on them in terms of their names.

O’Connor, Walker, and Moore: Names as Power

A name change marks a clear shift in power. In O’Connor’s “Good Country People” the main character “had gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother until after she had done it” (O’Connor 3). To fully understand why someone would change their name, one needs to look at both the original name and its meaning and the circumstances surrounding the decision to change the name. The name Joy evokes images of a happy, positive individual who radiates a passion for life. As a child, the name Joy may have adequately described her, yet after the “hunting accident” that robbed Joy of her leg, her name felt false to her (O’Connor 3). How could her name be Joy when she felt no happiness? In the singular moment of losing her leg much of her imagined control was taken away. She could not do anything about the loss of her leg, other than attempt to adapt to a new lifestyle. This meant that

she sought to gain control in other areas of her life to compensate for the lack of the control over her own body.

From then on, Joy fights for a sense of direction in her own life, therefore changing “her legal name [to] Hulga” (O’Connor 3). Instead of evoking happiness the new name conjures “the broad blank hall of a battleship” which is interesting because battleships are associated with extreme power (O’Connor 9). Hulga sees her existence as a “battle” for control over her own fate, perhaps leading to her permanently “expressionless” face or the fact that she acts out in almost childish ways, like “making the awful noise” when walking even though she didn’t have to (O’Connor 4). Taking any bit of power back, specifically power in the way that people viewed her becomes part of her healing process, one that takes years. Renaming herself becomes “her highest creative act” (O’Connor 3). Creativity comes completely from within and can be seen as a form of self-expression. Hulga desperately needs a way to express herself, to show the world who she has become. She no longer wants to be associated with a joyful innocent child, but rather a “battleship” that can stand its ground and weather any storm it faces. For O’Connor self-naming is the ultimate means of regaining autonomy and the first step of healing while education can do little to aid in the healing process and only restricts Hulga’s ability to express herself.

Changing a character name can also take further control away from them instead of giving them a greater sense of freedom. Moore explores this in “Community Life” where Olena is told by her parents that “from here on in, you will no longer be Olena. You will have a nice American name: Nell” (Moore 59). Already her last name has been changed from “Todorescu to Resnick” because her parents had immigrated from Transylvania to Vermont and wanted to fit into their new home (Moore 59). Her parents do not change her name out of spite, like Joy does, but rather to give Olena a better chance at fitting in. Yet it still takes control out of Olena’s

hands. She may only be a first-grade girl, but she still desires autonomy, a shared desire for the women within these short stories. The attempt at renaming Olena then only hurts her chances to adapt to a new society and culture, by limiting her sense of self and in the end causing more problems for Olena.

In an interesting turn, “only her parents... ever called her Nell, her secret, jaunty American self, existing only for them” (Moore 59). The renaming thus fragments Olena into two people, not allowing her to have full control over either part of herself because she constantly switches between two different selves. This is where her control is taken from her. There is the “Nell-that-never-lived,” who interacts with only two people (her parents), and there is Olena who interacts with the world (Moore 59). When her parents die, “*Olena; [becomes] Alone*” (Moore 59). Without the social support of her parents, Olena withdraws even though she longs to be “someone living coltishly in the world, not someone hidden away, behind books” (Moore 59). Here her educational background serves as her only coping mechanism, greatly limiting her opportunities to connect with people and to develop a better social support system and therefore, take back control of her life.

Having a solid support system allows characters to have a greater sense of autonomy, but often support systems for those with advanced education are hard to come by. Walker comments on familial support systems in her story “Everyday Use.” When Dee changes her name to Wangero, she expects her mother to have difficulty calling her by a different name, going as far as to say, “You don’t have to call me by it if you don’t want to” (Walker 4). It almost reads as if Dee does not want her mother to call her by her new name, as if she wants someone to remind her of her original identity. Yet her mother goes along with the name, calling her Wangero aloud, although in her mind there is a level of confusion. Her daughter’s name appears as a two-fold

name in her mind, as “Wangero (Dee)” (Walker 4). A base level of acceptance exists, and the mother truly does try to change her way of thinking. It is reasonable for the mother to refer to Dee using a two-pronged name at first, due to the extreme change. Calling someone by a new name, especially a person that you have known your entire life is not easy and cannot be accomplished in a single sitting. This acceptance of her daughter’s name is short lived and soon her thoughts shift to “Dee (Wangero)” (Walker 6). The mother truly tries to accept her daughter’s new name, because she knows that it is important to Dee and wants to make sure that the relationship is as stable as can be. This acceptance is easier in the beginning of their interaction, when Wangero appears as a different person than the Dee that left home. Yet when Wangero starts to ask about family heirlooms, she becomes Dee. Dee never left home and is still a spoiled child in her mother’s eyes, one that was never forced to grow up and feels entitled to all her family has. The behavior at the conclusion of the story, matches the behavior that the mother witnessed for most of her life, making Wangero vanish and leaving the familiar Dee in her place.

The additional education that Dee received as a child makes her feel entitled to take the things she wants. Her education separated her from her family early on as she read to them, “forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon” her mother and sister (Walker 2). Dee thought that the ideas she learned about in school were better than those she learned at home, due to the fact that she was exposed to them in a fancy school in Augusta. Her education makes her feel superior and that superiority turns into a complex that has negative ramifications in her family life. While her mother and Maggie try to understand Dee’s desires, they cannot fully. Yet they still accept her the way she is, while her extra education makes her feel as if she does not need to accept them the way that they are. With a new name, she attempts to show that she views herself as above them and above the family name that she received. Wangero comes from more

and expects more than Dee, even though the two are ultimately the same person. The educated Wangero must compete with the simple Dee, splitting her identity.

A fractured identity can also arise when a character's name does not match their physical appearance, as previously seen in "Good Country People," but Moore takes this idea a step further, equating names with beauty and worth. The story "Agnes of Iowa" opens with Agnes's mother commenting that "a good-looking woman [is] even more striking when her name [is] a homely one" (Moore 78). Names then are associated with the exterior beauty of a woman and, by extension, her worth to society. This can also be seen in one of the post-2015 works, Mary Gordon's "Ugly." Hugh remarks "even the name is ugly" when referring to Lois, the owner of the antique shop who does not invest effort in her outward appearance (Gordon 143). According to Hugh and Agnes's mother, names have an inherent beauty or ugliness to them and that reflects the character of the person. Names then can be seen as a cage that limit what a person can accomplish in life and also how others see them.

Some characters have the strength to break free from the cage that is their name, whereas others attempt and fail. Agnes "had always been a bit at odds with her name" (Moore 78). This stems from a lack of self-confidence about her own body and the fact that she "turned out not to be attractive at all," unlike her mother and sister (Moore 78). For a while, she tries "to pass it off as French... and encouraged people to call her On-yez" (Moore 79). Here Agnes attempts to take some measure of control and come to terms with her own name, but it backfires and she reverts to the original pronunciation. Her brief attempt at control does not last long and does not encourage her to think positively of her own name. To her it marks a trap, one where she must experience a life full of limitations, many, if not all of which are self-imposed. The name then comes to represent a self-fulfilling prophecy in which Agnes cannot escape.

Short Fiction of Today

Names and Namelessness

Each narrator in the early pieces explored in the previous section has a negative relationship with their name that causes a splintering of identity. In contrast to all of the early stories, contemporary stories often leave their narrators unnamed. Without a name, one's identity can become blurred. In McCullum-Smith's story, her protagonist remains unnamed while all the other characters in the story are given names. In the case of McCullum-Smith, her narrator is an "outlier" and does not fit in with her peer group (McCullum-Smith 270). Even though the narrator lives with a roommate, Melanie, she exists only on the periphery of the group. In his study of the nameless narrator, Sam Sacks theorizes that if any character "has no proper home, [she] can also have no proper name" (Sacks). McCullum-Smith's nameless narrator supports this idea. Her narrator has a complicated home life, with a naïve father and a mother that she says is "dead" because it "save[s] time" in terms of explaining the complicated relationship (McCullum-Smith 273). The narrator has no true home with her parents or within her group of friends. Without a sense of belonging and a group of people to belong to, an individual lacks a complete identity. Therefore, their namelessness symbolizes their incomplete identity.

The same reasoning explains the nameless narrator in McCarthy who is "a freak who is freakishly good at a random thing" (McCarthy 194). In the narrator's case her skill is described as angularity, meaning that she was able to rewrite a story of the Biblical Eve from a unique perspective. The narrator here lacks a group of people to support her, due to her ability to master only a single skill. Therefore, the narrator's "angular" nature, serves to separate her from her peers at Harvard and limit the scope to which she can define her own identity (McCarthy 194). Without a name, she becomes nothing but the girl who wrote a single famous play and did nothing more with her Harvard education.

The current literary trend of not naming characters is reminiscent of allegories and fairy tales. Historically one reason that these authors omit their protagonists' names is "to set their tales outside of time" (Sacks). Namelessness thus renders characters timeless. Connections, which might be dampened by naming a character, can be made across genres and time periods. All of the authors want their stories to resonate with their readers and depict the realities faced by women in academia including loneliness, discrimination and dissatisfaction. Nameless narrators exist for a secondary reason, namely the trend of unnamed characters being an "increasingly familiar trait in the fiction of exile" (Sacks). This means that those who feel exiled, whether physically or mentally, often lack a name. The separation from others rarely occurs by choice, making the narrators in these stories feel unworthy and confused. Having no one to turn to is one of the many reasons why the women are not satisfied with their own lives and feel as if they have no control.

Painful Reminders of Lacking Identity

Namelessness does not always remain permanent though. In "Since Vincent Left" the narrator remains unnamed for the first few pages and her first name, "Amy," is only used once (Lin-Greensberg 83). Amy's entire world shifts when she gets divorced and is forced to find a new identity without her husband Vincent. Her difficulty in adapting to a new situation is only aggravated when Morgan continuously calls her "Dr. Miller" even though she only has "an MFA, not a PhD, and was not a doctor" (Lin-Greensberg 87). Lin-Greensberg calls into question how important honorifics are in defining sense of self, by highlighting the harm Morgan does to the narrator by failing to use the correct honorifics. Morgan believes she is showing respect to Amy by constantly using the honorific "Dr.," yet by doing so, Morgan only points out that Amy's actual identity does not match her perceived identity. A split in the sense of self results.

Amy begins to question the “realness of [her] existence” (Sacks). While Amy does indeed confront Morgan saying, “just stop it with the constant Dr. Miller, okay?” she does so with the reason that “Miller’s my husband - my ex-husband’s - last name” (Lin-Greensberg 92). While her reasoning makes sense, it also feels like a flimsy excuse. The reader can easily infer the real reason behind Amy’s reluctance at being called Dr. Miller. It is not because of the last name but the unearned honorific. Using the honorific only enforces Amy’s fractured sense of self, further isolating herself from those around her and limiting her autonomy. The unearned honorific connects her directly to academia, therefore making her worth and identity tied directly to her job. Calling her “Dr. Miller” forces her to only be seen through the lens of academics and as a professor, not as an individual who experiences things outside of the university setting. Her connection to education becomes all that she is.

Intent plays a role in whether or not renaming can restore power or limit it, something that Unferth comments on in “Wait Until You See me Dance.” Her narrator never reveals her given name but instead receives the name Mary by the office assistant, who also remains unnamed. The office assistant “called [her] Mary and soon had them all calling [her] Mary” after she connects the main character with a character from the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Unferth 19). Unferth does not reveal whether the narrator enjoys the new name or fights against being referred to as someone else. This perhaps suggests that the narrator accepts the false name with the same passive indifference that she brings to all of life’s battles. The story itself has a hopeless tone throughout, specifically in moments when the narrator mentions her job. She struggles to find meaning in the students “whose names I would never know, whose faces I’d forget, and whose passing or failing grades were like changes in the air temperature, were nothing to do with me” (Unferth 23). Perhaps this hopelessness explains why the narrator did not bother correcting

people, because she felt like she would not be heard. Her students do not appear to hear her: why should the other faculty members? How hopeless does one have to be, to not want to be known by their own name? However, Unferth could have also obscured Mary's reaction to her new name for another reason. Perhaps the narrator was feeling so hopeless and trapped that she wanted a fresh start. Getting a new name could have given that to her. By not revealing the narrator's reaction to the new name, Unferth reveals multiple readings of the scene.

Once again, the meaning of the new name plays a role in whether or not the name will limit or increase the amount of self-governance felt by the individual. While the office assistant thinks that the comparison is apt, the narrator does not relate to it and responds with "I don't know that movie" even though she does (Unferth 19). The pretense at not understanding the reference and therefore ending the conversation with the office assistant does not work as intended. By shutting down the conversation, Mary was perhaps hoping that the name would not stick—but it does. What is more interesting is the narrator notes "the assistant had it a little wrong about the movie" (Unferth 21). The office assistant believes that the main character of the movie, named George, is shown a future, in which the woman that he likes, named Mary, has turned into an old woman who is a librarian. In reality the angel shows George "what the world would be like if George had never existed" with the intention of proving that every life has a purpose and meaning (Unferth 21). The office assistant misses the point and therefore misunderstands the name she gives the narrator. Where the office assistant simply tries to be funny when she says, "She's an old maid! She works at the Library! You should put it on your voice mail," the true meaning is actually rather sad (Unferth 19). The narrator's sense of having no impact directly relates to her status as an adjunct who is always in a "dependent or subordinate position" (Unferth 21). The narrator feels that "nothing would be different if I

weren't around. I haven't caused anything, good or bad" (Unferth 33). To the office assistant, the name was probably meant as a joke. Yet to the narrator it comes to represent her banality and how trapped she feels in her world. The name limits her to the same fate as the Mary in the movie, one characterized by a lack of confidence and a gendered misrepresentation of a woman's life.

Certain names have such strong associations that they trap those who carry them within a predestined existence. McCarthy utilizes the name of Eve within her story. The name of Eve has plenty of connotations, but McCarthy twists those meaning to provide a jarring insight into the reality of names. The narrator writes a play "in which the biblical Eve kills the biblical Adam, then travels forward in time to counsel a young heroin addict named Jane" (McCarthy 194). The names of Adam and Eve, even when the word Bible does not appear, evoke clear images of the first humans. The narrator twists the standard view of the name Eve by allowing her character to "travel forward in time" (McCarthy 194). Time then comes to show that certain names never lose their associations, no matter how much time has passed. Eve will always be related to the Bible. However, her new role in the narrator's play allows her a chance to break out of her predestined role and away from a story that most of the world knows. Instead of being the one who falls into sin because of a desire for knowledge, Eve becomes a beacon of knowledge for women, one who wants to share wisdom instead of sin. Twisting the name of Eve gives the educated women watching the play "pure vindication, the raising of the banner they'd seen so dispiritingly flag" (McCarthy 194). While Eve's name is not changed like Joy to Hulga, the meaning behind her name changes to represent a new kind of woman and new goals in life. This change ultimately shows once again that names serve as cages, but changing a name, whether the whole name or just the association, gives power back to the woman who bears the name.

In the end, names are a form of self-expression and closely tied to identity. While character's rarely get the chance to name themselves, their names do have associations and meanings that can either serve to limit or free those characters. For women who are seeking greater control over their own lives, often by any means necessary, exploring their own names becomes a way to take back their loss of autonomy. In earlier fiction depicting educated women, protagonists fight to change their names, whereas many of the narrators in the more recent stories have no name. Many of the characters attempt to find their identity through education but fall short. Nameless characters lack grounding of their identity, causing them to seek education as a means of finding identity and connection. Education serves to enrich their minds, but also to separate themselves from those around them both physically and mentally, leading to a fractured sense of self and endless unfulfillment.

Bodily Autonomy

In many of the stories that explore the experiences of educated women, women use their bodies in sexual ways in order to find a greater sense of control and contentment in their lives. Sex becomes a crutch for many of these women, or—worse—a mechanism for subordination that perpetuates societal norms. Education, which many of these women attempt to use in order to take back control, serves only to further limit self-definition. Forcing traditional standards of beauty upon women with educated backgrounds, traps them in a cycle of self-loathing and depression. Because they are educated, these women can logically see the problems with traditional standards of beauty competing with education, but their education does not provide them with a means of escaping those problems. In her article “The Life of the Mind: American Academia Reflected through Contemporary Fiction,” Lisa Johnson reveals her belief that “women in academia don’t think that it is enough to be bright and educated; also, they feel they

have to fulfill cultural ideals of beauty in order to be successful” (Johnson 30). This desire to have both brains and beauty in order to be considered successful, complicates women’s relationship with academia. Within these stories, beauty and brains often are in conflict, leaving the women feeling overwhelmed and unhappy.

The body has often been framed, within the literary canon, as a limitation in terms of women’s abilities. Throughout history women have always been perceived as “*more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men” according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Lennon). By having a greater connection to the body, women therefore, according to men, had less natural intelligence. The belief that women were inherently less intelligent than men has greatly limited their opportunities for education and is something that women have had to fight against for generations.

O’Connor takes up theme of body versus mind in the 1950s by bringing up the concept of a physically limited female scholar, who ultimately blames her body for her unhappiness and lack of career. Walker makes a clear distinction between physical limitations and intellectual prowess by comparing Maggie’s physical shortcomings to Dee’s spiritual ones. It is not until 1998 with Moore that sexuality and sexual drive get discussed in relation to the body and education. The most modern short stories take the body-versus-mind conflict to the extreme compared to predecessors and explore educated women’s susceptibility to violence. Contemporary fiction attempts to break free from the notion of the body as only a limiting factor.

O’Connor, Walker, and Moore: Women as Animals

Early fiction pertaining to women and education shows the physical limitations often experienced by educated women. Hulga has “a number of degrees,” yet her education does nothing in terms of increasing her confidence due to her missing leg (O’Connor 14). She utilizes

education as a crutch, hoping that by obtaining greater education, she will be able to rationalize why she lost her leg. When logic cannot give her an answer, she turns to hiding behind her own body. She is “as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her” (O’Connor 13). Her leg becomes something to hide, to be ashamed of. It limits her from going and “lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about” (O’Connor 4). Anything outside the realm of normal, like a missing leg, becomes ugly and therefore, unacceptable. Her missing leg coupled with the fact that Hulga does not meet traditional standards of beauty, paints her as one outside of the normal. Christina Fisanick’s study on “Fat Female Professors” reveals that people who do not conform to traditional standards of beauty “are often treated as second-class citizens” (Fisanick 237). Hulga uses her body as an excuse for her unhappiness, even though it is not the sole cause of it. Her missing leg does present problems but her personality, shaped by her pursuit of greater education, is what truly limits her contentment.

Sexuality is shown as something to be fearful of within early fiction as seen in Moore’s “Community Life.” Olena’s separation from the community, brought about by her increased education and also an unhealthy relationship, leads to a fragmented sense of self that bleeds into her view of sexuality. Her only social interactions are with Nick, and soon she “become[s] him” (Moore 70). Her education and personal aspirations fade as she takes on everything that Nick is, even going as far as “to wear his clothes” (Moore 70). Intellectual gratification gets forsaken for the physical. This change of character occurs after Nick has cheated on her, shattering her self-esteem. Before meeting Nick, her education had allowed her to escape her fears in books. Her relationship with Nick begins at her place of work after she helps him find a book, meaning her

safe space has been compromised by him. No longer can her education and her love of books, provide support.

Images of rape, both traditional and non-traditional, appear throughout “Community Life” in order to show how ideas can be forced upon someone just like a body can be forced upon another. After being cheated on by Nick, Olena begins to lust after the women that he lusts after, “but she also wanted to beat them up. A rapist. She had become a rapist” (Moore 70). By evoking the image of rape, Moore shows how Nick’s identity was forced onto Olena. Rape takes all control away from the victim, completely annihilating their bodily autonomy. In the same way, Nick forces his identity onto Olena by making her interact with people who he then cheats on her with. He takes her body, uses it, then discards it, leaving her fearful of sexuality and sexual encounters. This sentiment echoes in the conclusion of the story where she goes to the doctor, hoping that they will be able to heal her from an unarticulated ailment. A gynecological exam ensues at a teaching hospital, where she becomes nothing more than a specimen to be studied. She is violated as “one by one, the hands of the students entered her, or pressed on her abdomen, felt hungrily, innocently, for something to learn from her, in her” (Moore 76). Here a rape does take place, but not a traditional rape. All bodily autonomy gets taken from her, leaving her empty and alone. Olena attempts to escape the trauma and heartbreak felt through her education and connection with literature specifically, yet her education does nothing to prevent her sexual exploitation.

An unexpected motif in fiction exploring the experiences of educated women is the idea of female bodies being equated with animals. O’Connor, Moore, and Walker all engage with the body by comparing it to various animals. Through these comparisons the authors uphold the idea of animal comparisons having variably functions, somethings highlighting women’s

empowerment and other times their helplessness. None of the contemporary stories use this technique, revealing a change in the way the body is viewed.

Early stories show the a contrast between the minds of highly educated woman and their bodies, illuminating how intelligence was undervalued compared to a physically attractive body. Wendy Robbins's study of the female professor as seen in fiction written by women reveals that a "learned or wise woman in a daunting misogynistic Western intellectual tradition, is with few exceptions, a figure of exclusion, ridicule and persecution" (Robbins 46). This "exclusion" is furthered not only through a focus on their physical attributes of female characters but also through their comparisons with animals, which in turn functions to separate them from the world of academics. Kari Weil's "A Report on the Animal Turn" analyzes the connection between language and autonomy in both humans and animals. Her findings indicate women are "unequally endowed" with physical descriptions that characterize them as animalistic as compared to men (Weil 8). Weil believes that comparing women to animals is an "exercise of power" (Weil 7) perpetrated by males who desire to remain in control of women, by limiting female autonomy. On the part of the authors in this thesis the animalistic comparisons function as a means of exploring the complex power dynamics that surround women's education.

Connecting women's appearances and mannerisms to animals draws a distinct line between their bodies and their minds. Animals often play a subservient role to humans, in part due to the idea that they do not have as complex of thoughts as humans. Although, not all authors believe that animals are less than humans with those who object citing speciesism as the cause for this thought. Olena from "Community Life" gets demoted to a subservient role when her smile is likened to that of "a dog's smile" (Moore 60). Strengthening the argument that she is subservient to Nick is the idea of dog as man's best friend. Dogs are the secondary figure in the

image, just as Olena becomes secondary to Nick. The final description of the story also compares her to “something wild—an animal” leaving the reader with a firm grasp on her station in life (Moore 76). No hope exists for Olena to rise above the status of animal despite her substantial excessive knowledge of books and literature. An animal, one that serves man, is all that she can hope to be.

In the same way, Manley of “Good Country People” views Hulga “like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo” (O’Connor 9). The image of Hulga being a zoo animal directly reveals the cage that women are forced into. Her body already serves as a mental cage, as previously discussed; but here, the story anticipates the way in which Manley will use her body to physically trap her. The missing leg exoticizes her and makes her an attraction to Manley, who looks at her “with open curiosity” (O’Connor 9). It is not her mind that draws him in but her unusual figure. A simple glance at her reveals something unique. If Manley thinks of her as nothing but an animal that he must deceive, something less than human, it becomes easier from a moral standpoint to deceive her.

Maggie from “Everyday Use” receives similar treatment to Hulga as she looks like “a lame animal” (Walker 1). She is something to be looked down upon, partially due to her lack of education as opposed to her sister, Dee. Yet Maggie has “a brain like an elephant,” which actually has a positive connotation, for elephants are thought to be wise and gentle (Walker 5). By equating Maggie’s memory with that of an elephant, Walker shows that perhaps those without high levels of education have better memories than those with, even if a physical disability limits them. Despite a potentially hopeful note from Walker, the majority of animal connections with women are used to highlight the dehumanization of women. Depersonalization

occurs to all of these women through the use of animal comparisons, painting their experiences as less valuable than male experience and causing breakdowns in self-identity.

Short Fiction of Today

Animal Echoes

Of the recent short stories, only one engages with the idea of the female being connected to animals, but with the intention of reversing the traditional motifs. Roupenian's title evokes the idea of "the crazy cat lady," which has been around for centuries and continues to paint a vivid image of an older, unmarried woman who has nothing but cats for company. The title "Cat Person" evokes these connotations at first glance. The history of this stereotype is deeply gendered. According to Lucy Jones, who has studied the stereotypes surrounding the crazy cat lady motif, the term has historically served as nothing but a "device for transferring shame and judgment on women who challenged traditional roles or were hard to domesticate and keep in line" (Jones). This can be seen as early as the 13th century where women were connected to the mysterious and aloof nature of felines to females. The image still holds power today, but many women are embracing the term and even flaunting it at events like Cat-Con and in books like *Cat Lady Chic* (Jones). Even with women claiming the term as their own, a sexist history still exists and continues to influence the connotations of the term, making Roupenian's evocation of the term interesting.

While Roupenian does reference some of the stereotypes associated with being a "cat person" she also puts a twist on them. Margot herself does not fit the stereotype of a crazy cat lady at all. Throughout the story, Robert gets associated with cats, not Margot, making him the titular cat person, thereby turning the gendered stereotype on its head. His personality traits match those associated with self-proclaimed cat people more than dog people. Studies on the personality traits associated with dog people as opposed to cat people have revealed that those

who identify as dog people tend to be more extroverted and score higher on categories of agreeableness but lower on openness (Gosling & Potter). Robert has more introverted tendencies than Margot, who flirts “with her customers, a habit she’d picked up back when she worked as a barista” (Roupenian). Margot does not even own a cat but instead brings up “her childhood cat, Pita” in order to further connect with Robert, who has “two cats, named Mu and Yan” (Roupenian). Because Robert fits these characteristics, the expectations of the crazy cat person are subverted. The fact that Margot is seeking out an education and is also very social limits her from being confined to the stereotypes of a crazy cat lady and offers insight into the potential benefits of an education.

Body versus an Educated Mind

Contemporary fiction published after 2015 tends to focus on the sexualization of women rather than exploring the body as a source of physical limitations. McCarthy reveals the depth of sexualization of the body through the ironic sexualization of child. No physical description of McCarthy’s narrator exists but her narrator does focus on the “sexed out stare” that Isabel gives her during a tutoring session (McCarthy 196). At only thirteen years old, Isabel already has developed the look that tells people she has engaged in too much sex and is now tired of it. The reader realizes just how sexualized Isabelle is when it is revealed that she “looked like a soft porn star” (McCarthy 196). Everything about her becomes related to youth and sexuality. Her body becomes the only thing that the narrator can focus on, taking away from Isabelle’s intellect and personality. Robbins argues that women are often “identified [only] as body” (Robbins 46). It doesn’t matter how intelligent the woman is, she remains tethered to a physical body. This leads McCarthy to implore her reader to view Isabel as a child. By viewing her as a child, the reader can see just how standards of beauty and sexuality are impressed upon young girls, taking

away bodily autonomy without the girls even realizing what has occurred. Due to the standards being placed on women at such a young age, they often do not even learn what it means to have complete body autonomy before it gets taken from them. It is Isabel's "complete lack of awareness as she assumed a posture of sexual abandonment" that reveals "how utterly, she was still a child" and also that she is unaware of her autonomy being taken from her (McCarthy 196). Once again, McCarthy emphasizes the fact that Isabel is still a child, ultimately setting the stage for the conflict between body and mind that will last for the rest of her life.

The conflict between body and mind affects not only children but extends to middle-aged women as well. Sittenfeld portrays Nell's attempt to disengage her mind from her body so that she can have a one-night stand in "Gender Studies." After her divorce, Nell longs for intimacy and to be desired. So when Luke begins to flirt with her, she lets things continue, even though she "is still not crazy about the sight of him" (Sittenfeld 264). The desire for physical intimacy becomes an additional reason to converse with Luke, on top of getting her ID back. Even though Nell longs for sexual release, she also wants a partner who will mentally stimulate her. In the moment she can only satisfy one of those desires and the need for physical attention outweighs the lack of mental connection. The defining moment of the sexual encounter within "Gender Studies" is not actually the sex but the moments before sex when Luke remarks "Wow, you haven't shaved lately, huh? Not a fan of the Brazilian?" (Sittenfeld 263). In this moment, Luke forces societal definitions of beauty upon Nell. His thoughts are crystal clear. A sense of disappointment tinges his voice and she does not stand up to what he thought she would. While forcing standardized notions of beauty on women is not remarkable or unique, the "awful part is that [Nell] *did* recently shave- she shaved her so-called bikini line this morning" (Sittenfeld 263). Nell feels like she has to justify herself because she feels ashamed. In the end, Nell dates a man

who is “pro women’s pubic hair and appalled by how readily a gender-studies professor will capitulate to arbitrary standards of female beauty” (Sittenfeld 266). Even though this man readily gives Nell all sense of bodily autonomy back, her thoughts still wander back to Luke. The encounter showed her how experiences of sexism can cause lasting intellectual harm. Mind and body cannot be in harmony because they long for two different things in all situations, whether it be sex or a long-term relationship.

By presenting two differently characterized females in opposition with each other, Gordon’s “Ugly” further illustrates how societal pressures placed on women lead to a mind-body conflict. Laura’s unhappiness becomes obvious to Lois, a local business owner, when Laura stumbles into her antique shop looking for “one nice thing of [her] own” (Gordon 130). Already the idea of the beautiful becomes connected to the intellectual. Those with education can recognize the value and deeper meaning of beauty and they long to have more of it in their lives. Poetry and beauty get associated with education. Beauty also becomes equated with happiness, so Laura should be happy because she is considered young and beautiful. Yet she “dread[s] going to work every morning” because she hates her job and does not know how to achieve the expected standards (Gordon 130). Part of this mentality is due to the idea “that a woman’s beauty and appearance are the extent of her value” (Yakaboski & Donahoo 27). Laura longs for beauty and a deeper sense of fulfilment. Her physical appearance does not match her inner dissatisfaction. Yet Lois, whose looks “suggested the opposite of health” (Gordon 137) and who takes “so little care of her appearance” (Gordon 130), seems entirely content in life. While the reader does not know the formal educational background of Lois, she clearly knows a lot about each of the pieces within her antique store, making her appear educated. Lois’ physical form is summed up by Hugh in a single word: “ugly” (Gordon 143). In spite of her ugliness, Lois

experiences a beautiful and content inner life. Therefore, Gordon reverses the traditional association that equates beauty with worth, inadvertently reinforcing the idea that body and mind are in opposition with each other. Neither woman can have both a beautiful body and a well-stimulated and engaged mind. In the end, Laura forfeits the idea of inner beauty and happiness to sexual satisfaction, believing herself only to be worthy of the latter.

The lack of self-worth experienced by Laura in “Ugly” has roots in gender-based discrimination and abuse perpetrated against women. Gender based discrimination and abuse has been center stage in the popular media as movements like MeToo and HeForShe gain momentum and bring to light the unequal treatments of men and women. Studies focused on revealing the rates of crimes perpetrated against women, specifically college aged women, have received new attention and the numbers they expose are startling. According to a 2012 study by Vasquez, Torres and Otero “rates for gender-based violence victimization among female university students range from 15.2 to 53%” (Vasquez et al. 1658). This means that up to half of the women who attend university are likely to suffer some form of gender-based violence, whether it be physical, sexual or psychological. The reason for the inconsistency is that many women do not report the abuse until years later if at all, mainly due to the social stigma surrounding abuse and the varying definitions of what constitutes abuse. Definitions vary with many women brushing things off that fit the criteria for trauma or at the very least abuse. “It speaks to the way that many women, especially young women, move through the world: not making people angry, taking responsibility for other people’s emotions, working extremely hard to keep everyone around them happy” because sacrificing self in favor of others has become an expectation, according to Olga Khazan.

Sacrificing education in favor of men's attention occurs within "Cat Person" and does limit what Margot can accomplish, yet what further limits her is the digital relationship that she has with Robert that verges on abuse. Would Margot consider Robert's text attacks abuse? Psychological violence is "defined as an action or set of actions that directly impairs the victim's psychological integrity" (Vázquez et al. 1659). Margot experiences a breakdown in her integrity when she feels "overwhelmed with a skin-crawling loathing that felt vastly disproportionate to anything she had actually done," after having sex with Robert (Roupenian). The realization that her loathing is disproportionate shows that Margot continues to be able to function and reason. Yet the extreme loathing she feels is not directed at Robert but at herself. In fact, she even wonders if "perhaps she was being unfair to Robert" (Roupenian). Margot owes Robert nothing and should not feel responsible for his feelings in this way; yet, she feels so much pressure to worry about him at the expense of herself. Here, Roupenian exposes the societal pressures that so many women face "by revealing the lengths women go to in order to manage men's feelings, and the shaming they often suffer nonetheless" (Khazan). Even though Margot experiences high levels of shame, she places the blame on herself not on Robert. Never once does she consider blaming him, going as far as to wonder "if she was acting like a mean girl," even though "at the same time, she truly did feel sick and scared" (Roupenian). Her own emotions are disregarded in favor of trying to understand and coddle Robert and his feelings. The idea of being viewed as a "mean girl" holds more power over Margot than her own feelings. This psychological debate that Margot engages in proves that she has suffered from psychological violence at the hands of Robert.

While no physical abuse occurs, the argument could be made that Robert does sexually abuse Margot. Consent has been another hot topic in the media, and "Cat Person" does an

excellent job at showing the muddled lines that can be drawn between yes and no. Margot does initiate the contact between her and Robert and she does not deny that she wants to go back to his house with him. When the two get closer to having sex, Margot no longer has any desire to have sex with him, yet she does not stop him from advancing on her. “The thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming” and she feels like “it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon” (Roupenian). More than that she feels like taking back her consent “would make her seem spoiled and capricious” (Roupenian). She forces her own desires to take the back seat and gives into Robert. She never verbally denies him, but she also never verbally agrees to sex. The physical practice of saying no might be easy, but the mental aspect of speaking those words is far from it. Female emotions are, once again, forced to submit to the desires of men, putting women in a subservient position. So even though Margot’s mind says no, her mind submits to her body and she says yes. The power dynamic favors Robert, so Margot is unable to psychically express her intellectual and embodied objections. Ultimately, Roupenian shows the sad truth that education cannot prevent women from being taken advantage of.

All of the authors engage with the body in different ways, showing the multitude of ways women experience bodily pressures. Fisanick puts it best saying, “the body is a negative term, and if woman is the body, then women are the negativity” (Fisanick 241). Women’s relationships with their own bodies, especially in contemporary fiction featuring educated female characters, show how women fight against the old notions of how their bodies limit them. They should feel a sense of victory as they take back control over defining both their bodies and their sexuality, yet the conflict between body and mind still pervades their thinking. Ultimately, even with an educated background, women are still limited by their bodies.

Breakdown in Communications

Many of the earlier pieces that seek to define women's relationship to academics show a breakdown in communication through avoidance thereof. Characters refuse to talk about meaningful things or intentionally leave out information, often leading to them being excluded from society. The more recent fiction also explores obstacles in communication, particularly those deriving from technological advances like texting and social media. Technology allows the educated women in these stories to have a greater sense of control over their own image and their interactions with others. However, technology sometimes enables deception in these stories, which leads to miscommunication and a disruption of trust.

Communication serves as the foundation of any successful and meaningful relationship, something that is lacking in the lives of the women in the short stories. Charting the evolution of communication through the stories reveals that breakdowns in communication stem from the same set of problems, but the means of communication change with the times. O'Connor, Walker and Moore explore the limits of face-to-face communication within their stories. Within the pieces written after 2015, technology becomes a means for communication that presents both opportunities for increased communication but also a greater potential for miscommunication. The introduction of technology may allow women a greater sense of influence over their communication style and therefore, their perceived control, yet it can also hinder their ability to connect with others in face-to-face situations.

O'Connor, Walker, and Moore: Social Isolation

Olena from "Community Life" longs for the written word. Her love of books causes her to turn to library sciences when she fails to become an English professor. How people look at books, greatly influences Olena's view of those people. This love of the past and of books limits

the interactions she can have with people in contemporary society. She struggles to engage with them, to relate to them in any way. Her boyfriend goes to far as to say, “so they don’t read enough books... who the fuck cares” (Moore 73). Ultimately her love of books causes her to withdrawal from the community and stop communicating with those around her. “She had become afraid of the community” because the people in it differ so greatly from herself (Moore 70). Instead of books leading to personal growth and an appreciation for others, they limit her ability to connect with others. She would rather study literature than communicate with other people.

This phenomenon of education preventing connection occurs in “Good Country People” as well, with Hulga distancing herself from males and looking “at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity” (O’Connor 5). **Her education means that she is not even willing to attempt communication with people that she deems beneath her in education level.** If people do not have a similar educational background to her, Hulga deems them unworthy to converse with. Hulga even goes as far as to distance herself from her mother through a lack of communication between the two. O’Connor also shows the role of deception in communication in the famous moment when Manley reveals himself as a fraud. Up until that point, Manley had used romantic language to try to entice Hulga to let her guard down. Then he shows his true colors when “he turned and regarded her with a look that no longer had any admiration it in” (O’Connor 15). Due to her elevated educational background, Hulga automatically thinks that she will be smarter than Manley, that he will be unable to surprise or deceive her. Her faith in education, blinds her to the danger of being deceived by “good country people” or at least those who pretend to be (O’Connor 1).

Short Fiction of Today

Technology

Most of the contemporary stories place a greater emphasis on technology as serving as a medium or a roadblock for communication. Roupenian incorporates texting and reveals one of the reasons why texting has gained in popularity: “conducting the early stages of flirtation via text allows us to control even more of what we present to ourselves to other people” (Bromwich). The theme of control runs throughout all the stories in terms of how women communicate with others. Flirting through text gives women time to carefully craft each message to attain a desired end. The control is back in their hands because they can self-monitor and only show the parts of themselves that they think are relevant in any given moment. Yet technology can also lead to the perpetuation of lies and half-truths in relationships, especially during the beginning stages, making it both a positive and negative in terms of conducting effective communication.

Roupenian’s story illustrates how dating and relationships have changed with the advancements in technology, namely texting. In an interview conducted by Jonah Bromwich, Roupenian revealed her belief that “text messages are hard to work into stories” due to the fact that the act of texting holds no drama (Bromwich). Texting has taken over as a major form of communication, especially among young people, but few authors attempt to include it as a key element. In “Cat Person,” technology appears at first to be beneficial in terms of giving women back control, as women can perfect their image and be incredibly deliberate in their messages. Roupenian also shows the danger of flirtation through text. Texting “gives a lot of space to imagine what kind of person exists on the other side of conversation,” even though that person may not be real (Bromwich). Margot learns this the hard way when she realizes that the future she desires with Robert does not and cannot happen because the boy that Margot hoped Robert

was never existed “and never would” (Roupenian). The person with whom she “built up an elaborate scaffolding of jokes via texts” with does not exist in the physical world but only in the digital world of texts (Roupenian).

Having control over text backfires, as Margot finds she has “a hard time keeping up” with Roberts constant shifts in topics. Part of this stems from the fact that both people in any text exchange are modifying themselves to fit an ideal version of themselves that may be unrealistic. Neither Margot nor Robert blatantly lie to each other, but there is a perpetuation of deception due to the heavily measured words exchanged. The reality that Margot faces does not match the one that she has imagined, leading to a breakdown of self-confidence on the part of Margot. After her negative sexual encounter with Robert, she cuts off most contact with him, but continues to feel a sort of emptiness. Then she realizes “that it was Robert she missed, not the real Robert but the Robert she’d imagined on the other side end of all those text messages” (Roupenian). Her reality shifted and she needs time to mourn what could have been, even though “what could have been” was never grounded in reality. Therein lies the danger of texting.

Educated women can also purposely use technology as a barrier to communication, specifically as a means of shutting down interactions that they do not wish to engage in. Nell uses her phone to deter Luke from further conversing with her in “Gender Studies.” The sight of countless people staring at little screens in public transportation instead of interacting with each other is sadly familiar to most people. Some of them might be doing practical things on their phones, but many use technologies to avoid talking with others. Nell uses her phone “to see how much longer it will take to get to the hotel,” to avoid further conversation. Yet she tells Luke she needs “to send an email” in order to make it look like she is being productive and not rude (Sittenfeld 256). During this time, she utilizes another modern phenomenon that can enhance or

convolute communication, Facebook. She “accidentally discovers” what Henry, her lover of eleven years, is doing with his new bride, bringing about feelings of abandonment and pain (Sittenfeld 257). Instant communication and publication of your every waking moment can appear to foster increased communication but they often have the opposite effect.

Sittenfeld illustrates both the positive and negative effects of modern technology on communication in order to stay true to the real world. For example, Nell can call Luke when she realizes her license is missing, thus allowing Luke and Nell to get to know each other and spend time with one another. Without having the crucial technology to call Luke and get an immediate response, the two never would have interacted outside of the initial shuttle ride. Therefore, technology has the power to bring people together who might not have had the chance otherwise. A single text from Luke that reads “Hey call me” further develops the relationship (Sittenfeld 260). The message is short and to the point, unlike the in-person communication that occurs between the two of them, suggesting that a positive of digital communication is its conciseness. Ultimately, the encounter between Luke and Nell is negative and the conciseness of texting obscured their personalities long enough for the relationship to progress to a physical one.

Deception

Deception can take many forms including deliberately obscuring part of the truth, straight out ignoring the truth, and even censorship. Lin-Greensburg is the only author to also take on the challenge of navigating women’s relationship with censorship and academic freedom, specifically. As Amy shares a meal with the two students from the school editorial board, Morgan mentions the idea of “amending our club constitution to say that we won’t accept any materials that includes use of illegal substances, sexual situations or cursing” (Lin-Greensburg 89). Morgan defends her reasoning by bringing up the fact that they go to “a Catholic school”

and she wants to uphold “good Franciscan values” (Lin-Greensburg 89). At first glance, censorship does not always seem like deception. However, it is because it only allows part of a narrative to be told. Morgan sees it not as censorship but as “being selective” (Lin-Greensburg 89). Her desire to select only pieces that she agrees with directly connects back with Margot censoring aspects of herself in order to appeal to Robert in “Cat Person”. Entire narratives are obscured in order to paint a clear narrative, one that ultimately is based in lies. Amy brings this up telling Morgan, “maybe you don’t personally agree, but have you considered what you want to do is censorship?” (Lin-Greensburg 89). Until this point, Morgan has not even seen the potential consequences for being selective about what the editorial publishes. Even after Amy brings up censorship, Morgan does not see the problem. Her idea of the perfect narrative, one based on total control, is the only acceptable narrative.

Education does not prevent ineffective communication from occurring in “The Outlier.” Some of the most defining moments of dialogue are spoken over the phone, due to the fact that no one would be brave enough to say such negative things face-to-face. Speaking over the phone provides a kind of distance that limits the human connection that often makes communication more effective. The narrator sets up a social experiment where a boy named Justin was supposed to pay Eddie, who is Melanie’s boyfriend, to leave Melanie after going to the bathroom, stranding her to see how she would react. As Justin goes to pay Eddie, another boy, Johnny, sits at her table and begins joking around with her. The experiment gets ruined and Melanie comes home on cloud nine, feeling as if she truly connected to Johnny. The narrator cannot wait to call both Justin and Johnny following the encounter to fully understand what happened. Justin explained that he “paid off the boyfriend but when [Justin] left the can” another male student was at her table (McCullum-Smith 281). Justin then proceeded to take the money back from Eddie,

which just happened to be “the sum total” of the narrator’s savings (McCullum-Smith 280). The communication between the narrator and Justin gets completely disregarded as Justin essentially does whatever he wants, not what the two had previously agreed upon. The fact that Justin “hung up” on the narrator to end the conversation shows his complete disregard for her. He could care less about her experiment or even taking all her money. She becomes a pawn to him, one that he can use for his own gain, even though clear communication took place preceding the event. Maybe had the two met face to face to discuss the matter, he would have given her back her money or at very least valued her opinion, or pretended to, instead of hanging up on her. It does not matter that the narrator is educated, communication breaks down, leading to a failed experiment and an empty savings account.

The most telling line of the story comes within her phone call with Johnny. Even though she “didn’t want to call Johnny” she “needed to know for [her] records if his intervention was accidental or deliberate” (McCullum-Smith 282). Johnny had previously had romantic relations with the nameless narrator, and had even helped in the experiment, although he did not realize it at the time. (During a recent weekend, Johnny had helped the narrator rearrange Melanie’s furniture. He believed that Melanie asked the narrator to move her furniture, but in fact the narrator was seeing if she could dislodge Melanie from her apparent normalcy.) It is during the phone call interaction after Johnny’s intervention in the setup with Justin that Johnny lets it slide that Melanie “kind of looks like [the narrator]” (McCullum-Smith 282). Given that the narrator “can’t get over how ordinary [Melanie] is,” this remark causes the narrator to question herself (McCullum-Smith 282). It is in that moment that the narrator’s experiment fails completely and the narrator begins to question herself. The narrator specifically chose to study Melanie because of how ordinary she appears. The narrator firmly believed that she was drastically different from

Melanie at the beginning of the story, so the fact that the two of them are much more akin than previously thought scares her.

Ultimately, Johnny chooses to pursue Melanie over the narrator, and the relationship between Johnny and the narrator disintegrates to the point when years later, upon seeing each other at a 7/11 where the narrator works, the narrator “stopped working” forever (McCullum-Smith 284). Seeing him reminds her of her ordinariness and causes a breakdown in self-esteem to occur that limits occupational opportunities for the narrator and leads to her completely withdrawing from society. Technology obscures body language and facial expressions that are vital in determining the validity of someone’s statements. Had the two been physically in the same room, maybe Johnny would have seen the pain that his statement caused or maybe he would not have been brave enough to imply that the narrator is ordinary. Instead the depersonalization of communicating through technology allows him to say exactly what he thinks without consequences for himself.

Longing for the Past

Most of the women within the stories written post-2015 utilize modern forms of communication with ease. However, one woman from these stories yearns for more traditional forms of communication, looking toward the past with eagerness. Laura from “Ugly” has a “background... in literature” and even though she “left English literature behind,” she misses it deeply (Gordon 126). Her ability to communicate effectively and with a large number of people stems from her background in English, showing how valuable her education is outside of academia, even if she did not complete her Ph.D. She tries to reason with herself about why she left, reminding herself that “fighting with other overqualified, underpaid cohorts for the scraps left on the table of the dying liberal arts” is not something worth pursuing (Gordon 127).

However, her unconscious remembers “poems about roses” (Gordon 126) specifically poems by “Thomas Carew, Edmund Waller and William Blake” (Gordon 127). Those were the poems she planned to write her thesis on, and they come to her during those moments of partial awareness as she wakes up. She cannot stop herself from having those thoughts, but she pushes them down, not telling her boyfriend, Hugh, about them.

It is in her relationship with Hugh that the reader sees the result of her yearning for the past. When Hugh comes to pick her up and take her back to New York, Laura feels reluctance. “[She] didn’t want him here, here in [her] place” (Gordon 142). This is in part due to the change that she has undergone without him present. “Sitting in [her] chair, and looking at the lake, became the most important thing,” as opposed to saving for luxury furniture like Hugh (Gordon 140). However, she does not communicate her desire to stay in Monroe or even tell Hugh that her life has become something new and beautiful. Never does the reader learn about communication between the two during the time that she is away in Monroe. No mention of a phone call or a text to remind her that there are people outside of Monroe who care about her. The length of time that Laura spends in Monroe is unspecified, but the reader knows that it was over a month due to the fact that Laura spends a month living in the room in Lois’ house (Gordon 137). While the two probably did communicate, it is surprising that Laura would not want to share her newfound view on life. Instead, Laura hides it from Hugh.

The breakdowns in communications that are often exacerbated by modern technology also influence the strength or lack thereof in interpersonal relationships. The majority of educated women in recent stories suffer from divorce or unhappiness in their love lives. Part of this has to do with controlling their own bodies, as previously discussed, but part of it also relates back to the communication they have with the people closest to them. Both Nell from “Gender

Studies” and Amy from “Since Vincent Left” have recently separated from a long-time lover or husband. The relationships experienced by educated women leave much to be desired. Hugh and Laura exist in separate worlds that seem incompatible. Even women in the earlier pieces struggle to communicate with those closest to them, leaving all the women from all the stories feeling isolated, which contributes to their unhappiness.

Careers

Part of the “have it all” mentality that pervades contemporary fiction exploring women’s experience of academia is being able to have a job outside of the home. All of the women featured in the stories have a job, but what that job looks like depends on a few factors. Early stories explore the greater limitations forced upon women and what women can even do in terms of a profession. Many of these women have no opportunities for advancement and must work in traditionally female jobs. The stories written after 2015 emphasize a wider range of influences that make their careers unfulfilling, including being overworked, working in a field that they did not plan to, feeling a lack of ownership in their professional lives, and/or being focused on the social elements of work instead of the academic.

Lisa Damour’s article on “Why Girls Beat Boys at School and Lose to Them at the Office” provides context for many of the women in the short stories. “Girls consistently outperform boys academically. And yet, men nonetheless hold a staggering 95 percent of the top positions in the largest public companies”(Damour). Women’s drive to study and be the best not only stems from wanting to please everyone but also from knowing the staggering statistics that they have to fight against in the job field. Part of the reason why men do better in the job force is due to the fact that even when they are “overqualified and overprepared, too many women still hold back.” The phenomenon of women holding back can be traced back to the need to be

“perfect” and have it all. If one section of their life is not perfect, they label themselves a failure. So unless they can guarantee perfection at work, many women do not push themselves to try. Women within these stories conform to the statistics mentioned in Damour’s article. Not one story focuses on a woman who is satisfied with her job. None of the women are their own boss or even in control of their daily tasks.

O’Connor, Walker, and Moore: Limited Opportunities

The limitations placed on women in terms of career opportunities either force educated women into unfulfilling positions or prohibit them to work at all. Agnes from “Agnes of Iowa” “taught the Great Books class but taught it loosely” (Moore 80) allowing students to “use the class as their own little time to be creative” (Moore 81). She enjoys interacting with the students in her class but does not enjoy her overbearing boss, William Stauffbacher. He believes that she “should be stricter with the students” mostly because he feels “like [he does] all the real work around here” (Moore 81). He purposely excludes her at events, like not inviting her to the dinner for the visiting poet and again when he is speaking to the poet and uses a gesture to say, “we are both men,” leave us alone (Moore 90). All of the separation based solely on her gender makes coming to work difficult because Agnes knows she will never be taken seriously even though she’s a “published poet,” albeit a very minor one (Moore 85). Not being respected or valued in the workplace has negative ramifications for Agnes, namely that she becomes miserable in her daily existence. Her continuous attempts to be fulfilled through her work, whether it be connecting with students or attempting to connect with a visiting poet, lead to nothing.

Unlike Agnes, Hulga from “Good Country People” does not work at all even though she longs to “be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about” (O’Connor 4). Even though she earned a “Ph.D. in philosophy,” she cannot leave the house

much, due to her leg, and therefore cannot do the one thing that might bring her pleasure: interact with other academically driven people (O'Connor 4). Her lack of a job causes her misery, trapping her at home in a world of her own with no one to mentally stimulate her. Without a job to fill her time, she finds herself bored and under stimulated, unable to do anything but sit "on her neck in a deep chair, reading" all day, every day (O'Connor 5). During her studies, she at least had a purpose that drove her, but now that she has earned her Ph.D. there is nothing more left for her to do or study. The lack of purpose and direction in her life, caused by a lack of profession, cause a deep-seated unhappiness.

The only female within any of the earlier stories who appears to enjoy her job is Olena from "Community Life," simply because her job serves as a complete obsession. Olena works as a librarian and takes "care of books, tenderly, as if they were dishes or dolls" (Moore 58). Books are her passion and escape in life. They shape how she views the world and the people in the world. The library she works in "[is] one of the most prestigious university libraries in the Midwest" something that Olena is particularly proud of; yet, not all aspects of her job give her joy (Moore 64). Part of her job is to skim Romanian books "just enough to proffer a brief description for the catalog listing" (Moore 65). While she greatly enjoys reading literature, "it dismayed her that her Romanian was so weak, that it had seemed to almost vanish" (Moore 65). The vanishing of her understanding of Romanian traces back to a deeper pain, the death of her parents and the vanishing of their influence in her life. As she struggles to understand a language that was once natural to her, some of the joy that literature brings her gets lost along the way, polluting her thoughts of books. A profession that once brought her joy now traps her in a cycle where she is forced to relive the loss of her native tongue and her parents.

Short Fiction of Today

School as a Career

While some of the female college students within the contemporary stories have jobs, their main profession during their time at college is to be a student. In the stories, student interactions within academia illustrate a clear separation between their personal lives and their pursuit of intellectual knowledge. Fiction examining college from the student's perspective emphasizes the personal over the intellectual. According to Yakobski and Danahoo many contemporary "images of college life disregard issues of academics and administrative authority" and instead focus on the relationships formed outside the classroom (Yakobski & Danahoo 27). Relationships are seen as more important than education, therefore revealing that education often serves to isolate women from connecting with others. The women who choose to focus on their education give up opportunities to engage in social situations, which isolates them from their peers. Recent female interactions with education contained in literature "continue[s] to perpetuate limited themes and ideas, allowing very little space for broader illustrations of college life, women's lives, and how the two overlap and affect each other" (Yakoboski & Donahoo 24). While the college experience does not revolve only around academics, it is a key element, yet one that receives little attention in short fiction about women college students.

Roupenian's "Cat Person" does not focus on the academic side of college at all. In fact only one scene from her story is even remotely related to studying. A single line that mentions how Margot was complaining "during reading period" about the lack of food is all the information the reader gets about Margot's studies. Even within this section the focus lies not in what Margot is doing during the period, but the fact that she has "no food in her room" and "all the dining halls were closed" (Roupenian). Robert invites—then orders—Margot to meet him at a local 7-Eleven, which she begrudgingly does even though "she really did have to study"

(Roupenian). She forgoes her studies in response to Robert's demand, giving him power over her.

McCullum-Smith follows this trend of focusing on the social in "The Outlier," but she does give the reader more details regarding what her characters are studying. All the characters other than the nameless narrator have aspirations and clear degrees, whether it be "creative writing" or "history" (McCullum-Smith 271). Even though these women have some goals in life and the reader knows more about what they are doing in school, there are no scenes of them in classes; however, there are moments of them studying. What makes their majors interesting is that none of the characters end up doing things that relate to what they studied in school. Education did not serve to better their opportunities after college for success. Melanie, who studies history, ends up "hosting some icky reality show about husbands swapping wives" (McCullum-Smith 270). Clearly her education has been forsaken in order to find a job, one primarily based on physical appearance over intelligence; indeed, the narrator notices that Melanie is "skinnier [and she has] no longer mousy but blond" hair (McCullum-Smith 270). The reader never learns what led to Melanie's career, but it can be inferred that it is a job that she never wanted because it is such a far cry from anything related to history.

In contrast to stories depicting women focused more on their social lives than their academics, Lin-Greensburg's "Since Vincent Left" portrays an overly ambitious female college student who attempts to do it all within her academic career. Morgan is "a senior English and Business major, with communication and Pre-Law minors" who "love[s] telling everyone, especially her professors, how she was such an incredibly busy person" (Lin-Greensberg 83). Her entire identity comes from her role as a student. Most of her conversations directly revolve around her academics or extra-curricular activities, like serving "on the editorial board of the

Basilisk,” a school literary publication (Lin-Greensberg 84). On the outside, she looks like a well-balance student who loves learning. Yet she admits that she feels the “need to make everyone happy” because “everyone wants [her] to follow in their footsteps” (Lin-Greensberg 91). Her reasoning for taking on so many different majors and minors does not stem from a passion but rather a need to appease both her parents and make everyone proud. All Morgan feels is a sense of confusion about what she should do with her life and whether she is doing enough. Her profession of being a student does not fulfil her but rather fills her with dread for an unknown future. The need to live up to the expectation and “have it all” and look good while doing it, places Morgan in a difficult place of uncertainty and unhappiness. Ultimately her extensive education will do little to help her decide a path in life is she is not passionate about any of the minors and majors that she has. Amy puts it best saying, “no matter how many majors and minors she had, they wouldn’t protect her from how difficult life could be” (Lin-Greensberg 94).

Unfulfilled Alumni

In terms of women who are out of college, their jobs do not satisfy them either. Many of the women are working in fields that they do not enjoy or working under a domineering boss, who is almost always a male authority figure. Laura from “Ugly” has a background in literature, yet works “for Verdance in Human Resources” (Gordon 126). Her three bosses, all of them male, send her to Missouri against her wishes. There she “dread[s]going to work every morning,” partially because she “didn’t quite understand how to do” the job she had been sent to do (Gordon 130). Her bosses give her very little direction or support in fixing the “productivity lag” that occurs in the Missouri office (Gordon 128). Laura never wanted to go into Human Resources and would rather spend her day surrounded by beautiful things rather than people. She

longs for beauty in a job that stifles her creativity and limits her ability to recall and utilize poetry in everyday life. However, as soon as she begins distancing herself from her job, by moving out of the company provided apartment and spending her time with Lois “lines of poetry came to [her]” (Gordon 132). Poetry begins to creep into her life again and with it, beauty and passion that suggested a “possibility of an entirely new way of living” (Gordon 140). Instead of working with people, she starts to “fantasize about apprenticing [her]self to Randy,” who creates and restores furniture (Gordon 141). The possibility of having a new career brings her joy, revealing just how mundane and draining her job in HR has become to her. Sadly, in the end, she chooses a life of comfort, one funded by an unfulfilling career in HR, not because she enjoys it, but because **she does not believe her true passions are practical.**

The nameless narrator from “Ancient Rome” lacks a clear direction after completing her studies. After completing a degree at Harvard, she assumes that she will be able to find a job that fulfills and challenges her. Unfortunately, that is not the case and she ends up “*servicing [a] thirteen-year-old*” (McCarthy 193 emphasis in original). Instead of using her knowledge to write, something that she actually has a passion for, she must tutor children. This causes her to “weigh [her] Ivy league degree, thinking of all the anxious elites who believed in its talismanic power enough to pay for it” (McCarthy 195). Even with a highly elite educational background, she fails to do anything with that background, which causes the narrator to begin to despise her background in education. This leads to the narrator blaming her education for separating her from others, for turning her into something akin to an elitist, who cannot function among common people.

Even those who work in academia after college struggle to find pleasure in their careers. Mary from “Wait Until You See me Dance” views her job teaching “probationary English” as a “duty to tell [her students] some useful fact about the English language, a fact they could then take and go out into the world with and use to better their position in society” (Unferth 20). Education—specifically the accumulation of knowledge—becomes nothing interesting or special but simply something used to get ahead in life. Mary does not find joy in teaching, nor does she even seem passionate about English. Part of her unhappiness with her job stems from her position as an adjunct or, as she puts it, “a thing attached to another thing in a dependent or subordinate position” (Unferth 21). She feels completely dependent on those around her and unable to make her own decisions or take control of the classes that she teaches. She simply gets assigned to teach a remedial class for students who have no passion for the English language and are trying to do the bare minimum before moving onto the next class. Mary does not feel as if she makes a difference in the lives of her students, so she devotes the bare minimum effort to the class. Her lack of effort leads others, namely the secretary, to remark “You should quit that job... you’re no good at it” (Unferth 34). A huge factor for Mary not being good at her job is her hatred for it. She does not feel the need to work hard at it because of the low payoff.

Amy from “Since Vincent Left” also works in higher education and struggles to be content in her job. The reader never learns whether or not she enjoys teaching her classes, but she does have problems with the leadership within the university, who “cut salaries by seven percent this year” (Lin-Greensberg 83). Without adequate compensation for her work, Amy shares the same struggle as Mary does. Supporting themselves is something each woman within the stories has to deal with and some of them make choose careers that they are not passionate enough in order to have monetary stability. Amy needs to be able to support herself completely

on her own, now that her husband is no longer a part of her life. There is also an aspect of pride in terms of being able to support yourself all the while doing something you love. The reader can infer that Amy at least likes teaching her “creative nonfiction” course because she brings it up at the conference (Lin-Greensberg 87). Amy wants to be commended for doing her job in part because, she is proud of what she does. Being fairly compensated for meeting job requirements seems like an acceptable thing to ask for. Amy also shares the same mental challenge that the narrator from “Ancient Rome” does in terms of being a successful writer. “The novel [she] had been writing for seven years still wasn’t finished or right in any way,” leaving her feeling like a failure in terms of follow through and dedication (Lin-Greensberg 86). Questions of self-worth arise when her writing attempts fail, leaving her feeling as if she is unworthy. With the breakdown in her relationship, her job is all she has, so when Amy feels unsatisfied at work, little happiness can exist in her life.

While Amy attempts to find a personal connection through her students in order to make up for the dissatisfaction found in her job, Nell from “Gender Studies” tries to connect to a stranger. More interesting than the broken relationship between Nell and her lover of eleven years, is Nell’s deception when asked her job by the shuttle driver, who is a total stranger. She admits only to herself that “she *is* lying” when she answers that she is a professor of English (Sittenfeld 250). Instead of explaining that “she is a professor of gender and women’s studies,” she decides that “outside academia it’s often easier not to get into it” (Sittenfeld 250). Her passion for the subject appears to be abysmal at best in this moment, due to the fact that she is not even willing to try and explain what she does. This suggests that similar conversations have occurred before and Nell has decided that her profession does not deserve to be explained to others. Her prudish attitude toward Luke and her profession paint her as “an elitist asshole” and

she knows it (Sittenfeld 262). Only a few other lines give the reader any further information about her job and whether she enjoys it or not. Like with the pieces focused on students, the pieces focused on professors often highlight the social aspect of life rather than the academic. The fact that Nell “was once the first author on a paper titled ‘Booty Call: Norms of Restricted and Unrestricted Sociosexuality in a Hookup Culture’” does show her as a somewhat successful author with her work being “cited thirty-one times” (Sittenfeld 262). Her paper is interesting, but so is the fact that she “last checked Google Scholar” only the day before to see how many times her paper had been cited, making her appear obsessed with the success of her paper (Sittenfeld 262). It almost reads as if that single paper is the one part of her job that she takes pride in, and as a result obsesses over it. The fact that the “midyear planning meeting for the governing board of the national association of which Nell is the most recent past president” is “so boring” shows that Nell does not take pleasure in that aspect of her job, even though being a past president is a marker of professional success (Sittenfeld 251). It still is not enough for Nell to be happy.

The experiences of women in the workforce portray mostly the negatives associated with working: the pressure to succeed, being overworked and undervalued, and working on something that no longer holds their interest. Yet all the women attempt to take back control in their workplace by finding alternative ways to make themselves happy, most of which are based on social encounters as opposed to actual work. The lack of detail surrounding the women’s jobs tells the reader how little the women in these stories thrive or enjoy their jobs.

Conclusion

None of the stories has a happy ending due to the degree of discontentment felt by the protagonists of each story. While the causes for their melancholy vary, commonalities in the plots expose how the pressure felt by women to “have it all” actually traps them in a cycle of

unhappiness. Societal pressures come in many forms and cannot be traced back to a single source. **The media perpetuates idealized images of success and physical beauty, parents and mentors make offhanded comments that leave younger women feeling conflicted, and ____**

The largest difference between the fiction written after 2015 and its historical precedents lies in the endings and the hopelessness felt by the main characters. Many of the authors before 2015 do not write either positive or negative endings, allowing the reader to have some hope that things will improve for educated women. Agnes gets a “bright, new, and terrible” hairstyle at the conclusion of “Agnes of Iowa” showing that while things may seem horrible, a chance for something new and engaging exists in her life (Moore 95). The colorful short haircut is a drastic change for Agnes, who hopes that changing one area of her life will give her confidence to change other areas of her life. Her education and associations with academia no longer limit that potential future. In the same way, Olena from “Community Life” feels hope after feeling “the bright heads of her mother and father, searching for her, their eyes beaming down from the sky” (Moore 77). No longer does her love of books separate her from her family but allows her to reconnect with them even though they are dead. The written word becomes the medium through which she can move on. Maggie smiles “a real smile” at the end of “Everyday Use” not one that shows fear or intimidation in the face of someone more educated than her (Walker 6). No longer is her lack of education something to be ashamed of, but something that allows her to better connect with her history and her mother. Dee and her education get forgotten. Unfortunately, Hulga from “Good Country People” does not get an ambiguous ending but a rather negative one. She gets left alone in a barn, her artificial leg stolen and her faith in those without an education permanently damaged. Even with her background in higher education, she does not see Manley’s deception until it is too late.

The concluding lines of the contemporary stories reflect the hopelessness each woman feels. "Cat Person" ends with a string of unanswered texts, culminating in the word, "whore" (Roupenian). A single word validates all the fears that Margot has felt throughout the story. The ending also takes all control away from Margot and gives it to Robert. Her education does nothing from stopping him from limiting her autonomy. A lack of control is also felt at the conclusion of "The Outlier." The nameless narrator ends the story "fantasizing about how she really was someone extraordinary" (McCullum-Smith 285). Only in her dreams did she ever make a difference and have control over her life. In reality, she dropped out of school and was unable to even keep her job at a gas station despite her intelligence.

In "Ugly," Gordon destroys all hope of Laura having a fulfilling ending when Laura leaves the chair behind. Yet Laura does not leave without saying a few heartbreaking words to the thing that inspired her to change, "You are very beautiful. You are fine, you are good, you are full of goodness and I am not. You don't belong with me. You wouldn't want to belong to me. You should be grateful that you aren't mine" (Gordon 146). Laura was so close to having an amazing, freeing life. The reintroduction of her boyfriend ultimately leads to the decision to leave the chair and her new lifestyle. As in "Cat Person," the ending gets determined by a male, and it is an ending where education gets forsaken. The nameless narrator experiences an epiphany at the conclusion of "Ancient Rome," when she finally admits that "maybe [she is] a feminist work" (McCarthy 201). It is a moment of hopefulness, that maybe her education allowed her to inspire others, to do something meaningful with her life. All of that is taken away though when Isabelle remarks "Hello? Anybody home?" startling the narrator out of her musings and forcing her to realize that others do not see what she sees (McCarthy 201). Her education has

led to conflicting ideas about the world and more importantly her own worth to society, something that she will never be able to fully remedy.

The endings for the professors introduce a hopefulness not found in the other stories, though ultimately, they still end in sadness. Unferth allows Mary in “Wait Till You See me Dance” to have a moment of freedom in which “[she] danced” (Unferth 41). Despite the negativity surrounding her due to her unfulfilling job and an uncertain future employment, Mary dances and lets herself live. She believes enough in herself and her educational background to know that she will be okay, but that belief only lasts for a moment. The story ends with Mary losing her job and unsure of where to go next, making her belief in herself appear as a farce. Amy from “Since Vincent Left” utters two words at the conclusion of her story, showing how much, she has grown and the potential she has. The words “I’m sorry” represent a chance to start again, to reclaim her passion for teaching and start working on her unfinished novel (Lin-Greensberg 94). Unlike the other two stories about professors, “Gender Studies” ends with Nell being unhappy with the new man in her life due to his “unendearing failure of imagination” (Sittenfeld 266). No hope for an intellectually stimulating conversation exists with this new man, even though he is educated. Nell needs someone to engage her mentally just as much as she needs a physical partner. Her intellectual desires are forsaken for physical ones, showing how education gets renounced for sex.

Literature depicting women’s relationship with academics focuses on the lack of control felt by women with greater levels of education and the misery they often feel as a result. Attempts to increase feelings of control and autonomy fail to bring the women any closer to their desired happiness. The largest problem that these women face is not being able to connect with those around them, limiting their ability to have meaningful and supportive relationships.

Women use their bodies as tools to entice people into connecting with them, flaunting their sexuality and attempting physical connections where spiritual connections are impossible. When physical connection fails they turn to communicating with others, but breakdowns in communication exacerbate their shortcomings. Whether it be in personal relationships or relationships at work, unfulfilling jobs limit the time they can spend with others. Ultimately, the reason for the unhappiness and inability to connect to others in these stories stems from women's vexed relationship with education.

In real life, women are faring better than these stories suggests. In 2019, the number of college-educated women in the workforce overtook that of college-educated men. Now 50.2% of individuals in the workforce who have a college background are women (Salam). That is an 11% increase from 2000, which is a startling number, one with positive connotations (Salam). Although a pay gap still exists between men and women, companies are more aware of their own discriminations and are beginning to self-correct (Salam). While the stories analyzed focus only on the negative aspects of education, women experience countless benefits from earning a college degree. The hopelessness felt by the women in these stories does not dictate how all women feel, nor should it limit what women attempt to achieve. The fiction depicting women's struggles with education has already precipitated change in reality. Hopefully future fiction addressing women's education will have a more positive outlook and happier endings for the characters.

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