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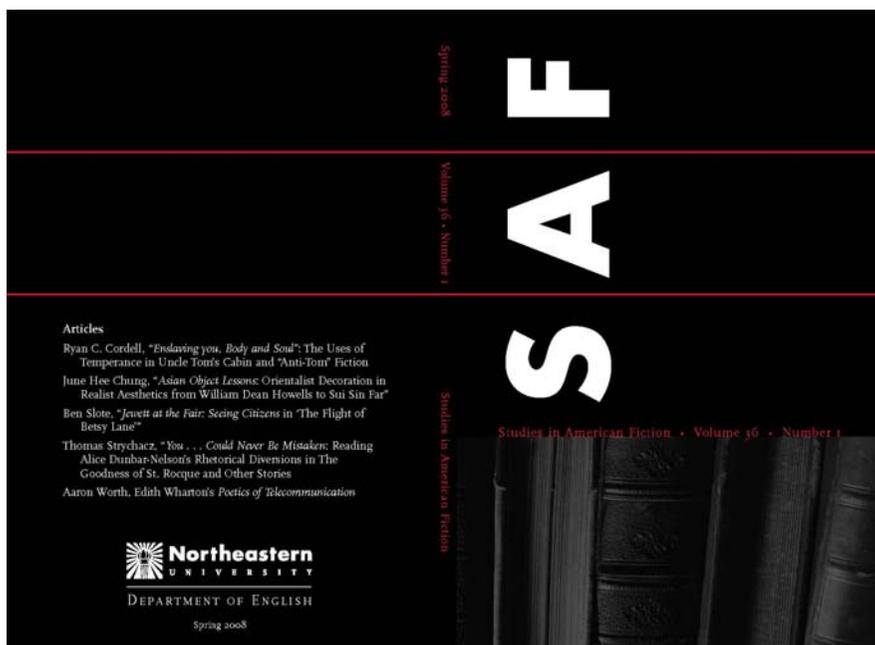
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## Studies in American Fiction

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Meg Gillette, *Bedside Manners in Dorothy Parker's "Lady with a Lamp" and Kay Boyle's My Next Bride*

**BEDSIDE MANNERS IN DOROTHY PARKER'S  
"LADY WITH A LAMP" AND  
KAY BOYLE'S *MY NEXT BRIDE***

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"Viciously unfair and unfunny," said Donald Stewart.<sup>1</sup> "Shrill . . . clothes for an elephant on a mouse," wrote Pauline Pfeiffer.<sup>2</sup> Ernest Hemingway's poem about Dorothy Parker, "To a Tragic Poetess—Nothing in her life became her like her almost leaving of it," is famous for its nastiness. The poem, with its scurrilous references to Parker's Jewish background, suicide attempts, and abortion, "shocked and offended" Hemingway's friends when he gave a public reading of it at Archibald and Ada MacLeish's Paris apartment in 1926.<sup>3</sup> Though ostensibly about Parker, the cantankerous poem and its hostile reception also say much about the uneasy social, cultural reception of abortion in the early twentieth century.

At stake for the poem and its listening audience is the question of how to respond to women having abortions. In its representation of Parker, "To a Tragic Poetess" embeds its own response, expressing through satire its discomfort with the sentimental abortion speech it ascribes to Parker:

To tell how you could see his little hands  
already formed  
You'd waited months too long  
that was the trouble.  
But you loved dogs and other people's children  
and hated Spain where they are cruel to donkeys.  
Hoping bulls would kill the matadors.  
.....  
To celebrate in borrowed cadence  
your former gnaw and itch for Charley  
who went away and left you not so flat behind him  
And it performed so late those little hands  
And were there little feet and had  
the testicles descended?<sup>4</sup>

The poem plays off a modernist revulsion against sentimentality to mark its aborting woman as a social pariah, self-indulgent, hypocritical, and unworthy of the sympathy she solicits; yet at the same time, the ruthlessness of the poem's parody cuts against itself to elicit from

readers the very sympathy for the aborting woman that the poem ostensibly resists. In a layering of responses, the woman's sentimentality unnerves her audience (the poem's speaker), while at the same time, the anti-sentimentality of the speaker unnerves that other audience, the readers/listeners of the poem. An anxious and angry response that itself garnered an anxious and angry response, "To the Tragic Poetess," and the scandal that surrounded it, enact the awkwardness of responding to women having abortions and express as well an ambivalence toward sentimentalism's place in early twentieth-century abortion politics.

Though detractors of sentimentality often dismiss sentiment and sympathy as narcissist lip service, awash in emotion but unable to affect the crises they bemoan,<sup>5</sup> the context of criminalized abortion witnesses the material productivity of sympathy and sentimentality, showing them to be social currencies that profoundly affect women's lives. As Leslie Reagan observes, during the years of criminalized abortion, a woman's ability to procure an abortion often depended upon her ability to affect her doctor's sympathies. "Sympathy for their female patients," she writes, "drew physicians into the world of abortion despite legal and professional prohibitions." In the 1930s, this sympathy for women seeking abortions prompted a rewriting of the American Medical Association's abortion statutes. Swayed by the economic hardships of the depression, the AMA elected to liberalize its abortion policies to allow doctors to consider "social conditions" when adjudicating "therapeutic" abortion cases. Prosecutors, too, took a softer line on illegal abortion. Though more and more women were seeking and having abortions during the 1930s, the number of abortion interrogations and prison sentences for abortionists and women having abortions decreased during the depression.<sup>6</sup>

This essay looks at how two depression-era abortion narratives—Dorothy Parker's "Lady with a Lamp" (1932) and Kay Boyle's *My Next Bride* (1934)—recover a modern sentimentalism to broker the return of "deviant" aborting women to normative, middle-class society. Typical of the abortion narratives written during the early 1930s, "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride* both stage response-to-abortion plots that focus on others' responses to abortion: "Lady with a Lamp" omits the half of the conversation spoken by the woman recovering from an abortion to focus on her visitor's treatment of her, and *My Next Bride* develops via the different reactions of friends and strangers to the protagonist's attempted abortion. In both works, sympathy for the woman who has had or is seeking an abortion runs in short supply. Characterizing this modern climate of anti-sentimentality as out of

touch with modern women's sexuality and reproductive needs, "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride* devalue modernist anti-sentimentality in terms similar to those used by modernists to devalue bourgeois sentimentality. As "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride* propose, women having abortions are the rightful heirs to a modern sentimentalism, and asserting the sophistication of sympathizing with an abortion-seeking protagonist, "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride* broker her reabsorption into a familiar bourgeois women's culture.

A testament to the rising abortion rates of the depression, more abortion narratives were published between 1929 and 1934 than during any prior five year period.<sup>7</sup> Unlike today's abortion narratives, which, as Judith Wilt argues, climax with a crisis of choice ("will she have a baby or an abortion?"), the abortion narratives of the depression climax with a crisis of response ("how would and should the protagonist's lover, friends, and family treat her after her abortion?").<sup>8</sup> More interested in the response to women's abortions than in the decision to have the abortion itself, abortion narratives from the late 1920s and early 1930s commonly begin *in medias res*, starting after the abortion. Josephine Herbst's *Money for Love* (1929) and Tess Slesinger's "Missis Flinders" (1932), for example, both open in the days following the protagonist's abortion: in Herbst's *Money for Love* the plot hinges on how an ex-lover will respond to the aborting woman's blackmail attempt, and in Slesinger's "Missis Flinders" (1932) the narration focuses almost obsessively on the post-abortion fruit basket the husband gives his wife (as if anxious about the quality of this response and others' perceptions of it). Margery Latimer's *This Is My Body* (1930) likewise dispenses with any pre-abortion deliberations to narrate instead an extended breakup scene, which, writing backwards, takes the protagonist's lover's lack of concern for her abortion as the very reason the protagonist had it. In Herbst's *The Executioner Waits* (1934), it is the family's response that takes center stage: early in the novel, a lead character dies in a car accident while contemplating an abortion, and in her absence, the novel details her family's attempts to come to terms with her abortion-related death. The responses of more distant relations also attracted literary attention. Chapters written from the pharmacist's and soda jerk's points of view in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) focus on their responses to a young girl seeking an abortion, while another of Faulkner's depression-era abortion narratives, "That Evening Sun" (1931), proceeds through the eyes of a young boy who tries to understand what it means for him that the woman who does his family's laundry has had an abortion. Langston Hughes's "Cora

Unashamed" (1934) likewise views abortion in the context of an employee/employer relation, and the story climaxes with the cook's "unashamed" response to her employer's "shamed" response to her teenage daughter's illegitimate pregnancy and abortion.<sup>9</sup>

Depression-era films also expressed an interest in how others would and should respond to women having abortions. In *Dr. Monica* (1934), a Warner Brothers film starring Kay Francis, the eponymous heroine must decide whether to sympathize with the pregnant mistress of her husband who comes to her for an abortion. In *Men in White* (1934), an MGM film starring Clark Gable based on Sidney Kingsley's 1933 Pulitzer-prize winning play of the same name, a nurse dies of a botched abortion and her lover, a young doctor engaged to another woman, learns to set aside his guilt and go forward with his life and medical studies. *Ann Vickers* (1933), an RKO film starring Irene Dunn, based on Sinclair Lewis's 1932 novel of the same name, sends its aborting woman to jail after her abortion; Vickers, though (in keeping with the era's softening public opinion toward abortion), goes not as an inmate, but as a social reformer, intent on rehabilitating the criminals within, and herself, to conventional adult female roles. Anxious about the futures of women having abortions, depression-era abortion narratives brushed past the personal dilemma of whether to have an abortion to focus instead on the interpersonal dilemma of how to treat and rehabilitate women seeking and having abortions. Women having abortions, as constructed and confronted by depression-era fiction and film, were not nameless sexual deviants on the periphery of modernity, but familiar social beings tied into a network of relations and circulating across a modern landscape.<sup>10</sup>

Dorothy Parker, high priestess of the Algonquin Round Table, was one such woman. When Parker found herself pregnant in 1922, just as her affair with playboy Charley MacArthur was waning, she checked herself into a New York hospital for an expensive, but legal, physician-performed abortion. Her oft-quoted quips about her abortion—she described the \$30 she got from MacArthur as "Judas making a refund" and famously punned "Serves me bloody right, for putting all my eggs in one bastard"—made her an especially public aborting woman.<sup>11</sup> In 1924, she published "Mr. Durant," a story described by Sondra Melzer as a "fictionalized version" of the MacArthur affair. Observing the parallels between the story and Parker's personal experiences with abortion, Melzer imagines that Parker "conveyed her buried pain into fictional transformations" to "purge [her] personal pain" about the abortion. Parker's biographer Marion Meade likewise supposes that "the need to write this story must have been intense."<sup>12</sup>

More than a personal expression of Parker's purported post-affair and post-abortion rage, though, the short story, published in H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, makes a public critique of the dearth of sympathy available to women having abortions. Focalized through Mr. Durant's point of view, the story lays bare his abusive treatment of his mistress, e.g., "Mr. Durant wished to God that he had never seen Rose. He explained this desire to her."<sup>13</sup> A model for how *not* to behave when confronted with an unplanned pregnancy, "Mr. Durant" expresses concern for the mistreatment of women having abortions and avers the need for greater sympathy towards them.

Parker returned to the topic of the mistreatment of aborting women's eight years later in "Lady with a Lamp." A testament to how commonplace abortion had become during the depression, the April 1932 issue of *Harper's Bazaar* published Parker's "Lady with a Lamp," a story about a woman recovering from an abortion, side by side with its regular fare articles on the latest Paris fashions. According to editor Carmel Snow, "It is not by chance that *Bazaar* publishes fiction and articles on travel and theatre and movies and music in its pages. All these go to make up the climate of fashion and to be in fashion one must be very aware of the weather."<sup>14</sup> In 1932, the au courant *Harper's Bazaar* reader could learn about the new spring colors in "The Evening Mode—Spring 1932," then, flip the page to "Lady with a Lamp" to learn how to recognize and how not to befriend a woman recovering from an abortion.

During the early twentieth century, the identity of women having abortions was a matter of intense public interest. With social Darwinism, nativism, and eugenicism all declaring motherhood the primary site of racial and economic competition, the question of who was having babies and who was having abortions was no longer just a titillating topic for gossipy women, but a matter for national policy. Newspapers and the medical profession circulated competing typologies of women having abortions: newspapers, driven by the voyeuristic interests of their readers and New Journalism's concern for the corruption of the city's underworld, highlighted the abortions of unwed indigent and marginal women, while the medical profession, in an effort to consolidate control over their own women and their own patients, sponsored the idea that married native middle class women made the greatest use of abortion.<sup>15</sup>

The structure and narrative arc of "Lady with a Lamp" reproduce and reveal the era's investment in settling the identity of women having abortions. Though Mona—the woman suspected of having an abortion—seems to speak, her lines do not make it onto the page. Appearing

only through the speaker's paraphrase (e.g., "You were simply all tired out? I see") and reactions (e.g., "Dear, you don't have to get so excited"),<sup>16</sup> Mona is simultaneously missing from the page and all over the page, a textual embodiment of the unmarked, invisible, but seemingly ubiquitous, aborting woman of the depression. Her inscrutability unnerves the speaker who presses Mona to confirm her identity as a woman who has had an abortion. While readers listen from behind the two-way mirror, the speaker lays into Mona with her best "good cop" routine: "Oh, don't keep trying to be brave, child. Not with me. Just give in—it helps so much. Just tell me all about it" (145). When Mona withholds the identification the speaker seeks, the speaker falls back on stereotypes of poor, promiscuous aborting women to communicate and stabilize Mona's identity. Poor Mona, the speaker notes, her apartment is a shambles; there are no tray-cloths, no flowers, the speaker has nowhere to sit. Gossiping that Mona's lover Garry is "just simply *pleading* with" another woman "to marry him," the speaker conjures Mona as the stereotypical "heroine" of a seduction plot, seduced and abandoned, just as the speaker had all along predicted: "I said from the very first, 'He'll never marry her [Mona].' You know that" (145–48). Mona's refusal to confirm her abortion draws readers into the interrogation the speaker stages. Requiring that readers also look for clues to determine whether Mona has had an abortion (Mona's tears at the speaker's paean to motherhood are often taken as a sign that Mona is, indeed, recovering from an abortion), "Lady with a Lamp" practices readers in strategies for spotting women recovering from abortions.

Having modeled and invited this interrogatory response, "Lady with a Lamp"—in classic Parker fashion—goes on to question the response's value. The problem, as "Lady with a Lamp" considers it, is that the speaker's response is insufficiently sentimental. Though the speaker congratulates herself on the magnanimity of her sympathetic capacity—"You might know I absolutely sympathize with you"—she fails to deliver, and her sugary assurances of understanding devolve into self-aggrandizing reproofs: "All I wanted to say was you might have known that I'm always for you, no matter what happens," she begins, only to chase the offer with, "I do admit, sometimes it's a little hard for me to understand how on earth you ever got into such—" (144–48). Later, her sentimental ruminations about the joys of motherhood bring Mona to tears, but rather than empathizing with Mona, the speaker grows giddy with each new sign of Mona's distress:

If you could just meet some nice, sweet, considerate man, and get

married to him, and have your own lovely place—and with your *taste*, Mona!—and maybe have a couple of children. You're so simply adorable with children. Why, Mona Morrison, are you crying? Oh, you've got a cold? You've got a cold, *too*? I thought you were crying, there for a second. Don't you want my handkerchief, lamb? Oh, you have yours. Wouldn't you have a pink chiffon handkerchief, you nut! Why on earth don't you use cleansing tissues, just lying there in bed with no one to see you? You little idiot, you! Extravagant little fool! (146)

Brushing past Mona's tears to ridicule her for her choice in handkerchief, the speaker gives the lie to her prior sentimental, sympathetic postures. As the speaker's hypocrisy puts pressure on her lack of sympathy, so too does the story's sentimental rendering of Mona. No hardhearted harpy, this aborting woman is a weepy, baby-loving damsel in distress. Pretty ("what with your lovely looks"), stylish ("and with your *taste*, Mona!"), polite (she compliments the speaker on her sewing: "Do you honestly, frankly and honestly, think it's pretty?" [146]), lovesick ("For three years, you've never had a thought in your head but that man" [149]), maternal ("You're so simply adorable with children" [148]), and vulnerable ("crawling off here all alone like a little wounded animal or something" [145]), Mona is easy to like. Conferring to Mona the attributes common to sentimental heroines, "Lady with a Lamp" encourages us to sympathize with her and thus resist the speaker's faux sentimentality. For "Lady with a Lamp," the problem is not that the speaker is too sentimental, but that she isn't *really* sentimental, that she isn't sentimental enough. Thus, while high modernists sought (famously) to leave sentimentalism behind, "Lady with a Lamp" seeks to bring sentimentalism back. Writing its aborting woman as a sentimental heroine, the modern heir of a sentimental tradition, "Lady with a Lamp" detaches sentiment from its outmoded Victorian sexual politics and claims its applicability to questions posed by modern sexuality and reproduction.

While modern literature is known for its reconsideration of sentimentalism, modern writers were not the only ones thinking about the place of sentimentalism in the modern world. The American Medical Association's debates over the liberalization of its abortion statutes also hinged on sentimental questions about the value of sympathy. While those in favor of liberalizing access to abortion alluded to the sympathy they felt for their patients (Dr. A. J. Rongy, for example, wrote, "No matter how callous the average physician appears to be, he is not left unaffected by the pathetic and often pitiful pleadings of the woman to whom a new pregnancy is a genuine cause of distress"<sup>17</sup>),

those opposed argued that such sympathy would lead to deleterious moral effects:

It is one thing to sympathize with the depleted and poverty stricken mother of a family of four or five children and quite a different one to recommend coming to the assistance of a widow whose posthumous child may be a burden but one that with determination and courage can be met. Nor should sympathy go out to all cases of illegitimate pregnancies, since this would lead to such utter disregard to precaution and such a lowering of moral tone that the stamina of our young people would be readily undermined.<sup>18</sup>

At issue in these early abortion debates is not today's crisis of biology (when does life begin?) but an early twentieth-century crisis of sentimentality (when is it good to sympathize with others?). Taking for its title the nickname of nursing icon Florence Nightingale, "Lady with a Lamp" enters into the AMA's sentimental abortion debates by conjuring the medical profession as the object of its sentimental solicitation. Seeking greater sympathy from its unnamed, generic "lady with a lamp," the story echoes and, in effect, defends the AMA in their recent pro-sympathy decision to liberalize their "therapeutic" abortion statutes.

The speaker's superficial resemblance to the implied readers of *Harper's Bazaar* opens the story's critique to its readership as well. Early reviews of Parker's fiction often comment on the ways her satires invite readers' self-reflection. Ogden Nash, reviewing *After Such Pleasures* (the 1934 short story collection that included "Lady with a Lamp") imagines that "the conscientious reader of this book is . . . likely to exclaim, 'My God, perhaps that's me,'" and the *North American Review* likewise declared that Parker's sardonic humor "makes us smile wryly because we recognize ourselves in her characters."<sup>19</sup> In light of the speaker's obsession with Julia Post's brown walls, we might imagine the speaker as a reader of *Harper's Bazaar*, poring over the preceding article about the new spring colors. Yet while the story's characterizations draw comparisons between its speaker and *Harper's Bazaar's* implied readers, "Lady with a Lamp" protects readers' egos by conferring to the speaker tastes that are decidedly uncool. After decades of debate about the New Woman, the speaker's doctrinaire "Every woman on earth thinks of marriage as soon as she's in love with a man" (146) would likely feel old-fashioned and small-minded even to 1930s audiences. Likewise, the speaker's love of tchotchkes ("You simply can't have too many" [146]) and abhorrence of Julia Post's

bold new room makeover (“She has brown walls—not beige, you know, or tan or anything, but brown—and these cream-colored taffeta curtains and—” [147]) draw her as a Victorian throwback out of step with the minimalism and bold strokes of modernism. Aligning the speaker’s faux- (or anti-) sentimentality with tastes that are kitschy and passé, “Lady with a Lamp” reverses modernism’s critique of sentimentalism (a critique which devalued sentimentality for being “kitschy” and “passé”) and calls readers to esteem the superior sophistication of a sentimental response to abortion.

The sympathy “Lady with a Lamp” solicits from readers serves a familiarizing, assimilative function. In “Lady with a Lamp,” there is no shame in understanding or even identifying with its ostensibly “deviant” aborting woman. In fact, the dramatic irony of the final lines, “*Edie. Oh, Edie! Edie, I think you’d better get Dr. Britton on the telephone, and tell him to come down and give Miss Morrison something to quiet her down. I’m afraid she’s got herself a little bit upset*” (150), depends upon readers’ empathetic recognition of the speaker’s hand in producing Mona’s tears. Affording us a knowing and self-aggrandizing chuckle, the line doesn’t punish readers for understanding this aborting woman, but rather, rewards us for our familiarity. In “Lady with a Lamp,” it is not the woman who has had an abortion who is the social pariah, but the unsentimental speaker. Mona’s apparent frustration with the speaker (“As a matter of fact, I was glad to hear you lose your temper. It’s a good sign when sick people are cross. It means they’re on the way to getting better. Oh, I know! You go right ahead and be cross all you want to” [145]) marks her as a kindred spirit who might appreciate our eye-rolling and with whom we might even imagine conversing once the noxious speaker leaves the room. Asserting the familiarity and sociability of this woman recovering from an abortion, “Lady with a Lamp” serves as a literary mixer, its sympathetic appeals working to destigmatize and assimilate depression-era aborting women to the ostensibly mainstream middle-class readership of *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine.

Commenting on Parker’s distinctive negotiation of sentimentalism, *The New York Times Book Review* observed in 1934 that “She has the inestimable gift of jeering at sentimentality without utterly destroying it,” and Elizabeth Majerus likewise writes about the ways Parker “engages sentiment in a critical way, partially embracing it, partially rejecting it, and ultimately revising it.”<sup>20</sup> In “Lady with a Lamp,” this revised sentimentalism helps familiarize and rehabilitate the era’s ostensibly “deviant” aborting women. While scholars of twentieth-century literature have increasingly studied the relation between

sentimentalism and modernism, their emphasis on the formal experimentalism of modern sentimentalism has tended to overshadow its historical resonances and cultural productivity.<sup>21</sup> But just as modern sentimentalism was no oxymoron, neither was it obsolete. As Parker's "Lady with a Lamp" readdresses it, modern sentimentalism spoke to the social crises of depression-era abortion politics, forging, as we have seen, an affiliative strategy for re-socializing and re-absorbing the growing numbers of women having abortions to mainstream middle-class female society.

Sentiment gets a similar update in Kay Boyle's roman-a-clef *My Next Bride*. Loosely based on Boyle's own life, *My Next Bride* tells the story of Victoria John, an American artist living in Paris who joins a failing artist commune, falls in love with a married millionaire, and after a bout of promiscuity with a series of anonymous strangers, finds herself pregnant and seeking an abortion. "Victoria's experiences," as Sandra Whipple Spanier observes, "mirror those of the author during the period in 1928 when, living in Raymond Duncan's colony, she had suffered a collapse, become pregnant, and with the aid of the Crosbys [Caresse and Harry] obtained an abortion."<sup>22</sup> As Donna Hollenberg argues, the trauma of the abortion catalyzed Boyle's writing in the 1930s, and in *My Next Bride* (the only Boyle novel to represent abortion) Hollenberg discovers "the beginnings of self-acceptance."<sup>23</sup>

Focusing on the trajectory of Boyle's personal life and career, Hollenberg's reading, while valuable for its elevation of the personal as a meaningful category of literary study, does not address the novel's broader resonance and social productivity. So spectacular is Boyle's biography that as Marilyn Elkins observes, "scholars frequently focus on [it] rather than on her literary achievement."<sup>24</sup> Boyle had, as Spanier aptly surmises, "a knack for being in the midst of the defining events and movements of the twentieth century."<sup>25</sup> She was at the Armory show exhibit with her mother in 1913; in 1922, she was in Greenwich Village helping Lola Ridge edit the literary magazine *Broom*; from 1923–41, she ran with the legendary gathering of expatriate writers and artists in Paris—her signature is the first on Eugene Jolas's famous "Revolution of the Word" manifesto; during the 1940s, she worked as a foreign correspondent for the *New Yorker*; in the 1950s, her political activism got her blacklisted.<sup>26</sup>

At the time of *My Next Bride*'s publication in 1934, Boyle had a reputation as one of modernity's foremost stylists.<sup>27</sup> The novel, however, drew only mixed reviews from critics who worried that Boyle was spending her talents on "trivial material" and "mov[ing] further

and further away from ordinary life.”<sup>28</sup> The novel’s most scathing review came from Mary McCarthy who complained, “Miss Boyle’s much touted modern prose cannot save her anachronistic novel from the category of peep-hole, wish fulfillment literature into which it inevitably falls.”<sup>29</sup> Today, Boyle’s distinctive melding of avant-garde aesthetics and activist ethics is attracting renewed attention from scholars, and *My Next Bride*—the last of Boyle’s so-called personal expatriate novels before her turn to more overtly public and political matters—shows us how Boyle used modernist experiments with sentimentalism to speak to the social crises of depression-era abortion politics.

Abortion, as *My Next Bride*, characterizes it, is a pervasive, if not always immediately perceivable, presence in modern life. The abortifacient pills Victoria takes ravage her body, not in the out of the way space of a doctor’s office or in the privacy of her bedroom, but in the public space of the commune gift shop, just under the noses of the bourgeois shoppers who blithely peruse the commune’s wares:

Women came into the shop and touched the bright scarves, and while they hesitated between this colour and that, the war the body waged against the pills’ destruction stood beside them, the scars of it written on Victoria’s face. . . . There’s another air [of hesitation] back there, Victoria thought, watching in anguish the quivering indecision of their minds; she was sick for it, stabbed for it, she could not wait until the door had closed behind them to run groaning to it. The gooseflesh was all over her, like a broken string of beads.<sup>30</sup>

Against the urgency of Victoria’s illness, *My Next Bride* contrasts the hesitancy of the women’s shopping, and from this incompatibility, the novel highlights the customers’ obliviousness to the woman trying to have an abortion before them. Shortly thereafter, Victoria’s humiliating collapse in a crowded metro station further underscores and makes uncomfortable her proximity:

She fell down among all the people hanging to the straps, and her head went under the seat, and the coffee she drank at the corner for breakfast came out at the other end. They lifted her out under the arms and they put her lying down on a bench at the Place de l’Opera station, and people came around and looked at her. (283)

This theme of the pervasive yet unrecognized aborting woman persists during Victoria’s search for an abortionist. This time, though, it is Victoria who finds herself in uncomfortable proximity to the era’s

ubiquitous aborting women. Standing in the abortionist's office, she recoils in horror as she imagines herself surrounded by the specters of "all the girls who had ever come into the place, the chambermaids from cheap hotels, and the girls from the Bon Marché and the nougat-stands in the traveling fairs, and the girls who must dance at Bobino or the Empire for a living, cheaply painted and cheaply paid" (302). Materializing from the walls and crowding around Victoria, women having abortions appear in *My Next Bride* as a ubiquitous, if not always immediately perceivable, presence in modern life.

At stake for *My Next Bride* is the question of how others will respond to women having abortions. Anxious about the response of Victoria's peers, the novel elects to begin its abortion plot not with Victoria's discovery of her pregnancy (which might seem natural considering the novel is focalized through her point of view), but rather, with Victoria's appeal to her friend Estelle for help: "Victoria sat down on the bed and suddenly she began talking to Estelle, quickly, under her breath. 'Estelle, I think I am pregnant. I don't know what to do,' she said" (272). The suddenness of Victoria's announcement circumvents the crises of secrecy and communication that energized earlier abortion narratives such as Stein's "The Good Anna" (1913), Wharton's *Summer* (1917), Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) and Delmar's *Bad Girl* (1928),<sup>31</sup> and after dispensing with Victoria's announcement, the novel waits with her to see how Estelle will react:

Estelle had begun to yawn, and the yawn stopped short in the middle. She lay still for a moment, expressionless, looking at Victoria, the eyes fixed in their blue, callous, stony stare.

"My God, you would be," she said, slowly. Her square red mouth was a little open, like a chipmunk's mouth, wanting the yawn again that she had left midway. It was swelling at her jaws, like a mouthful of nuts. "My God," Estelle said to Edmond. "Victoria's pregnant. Victoria would have to get pregnant, wouldn't she?" She took a nail-file off the table by the bed. "Edmond will get you some pills the kind the girls at the theatre use."

Edmond was filling up the glasses, carefully pouring the green drink out into the three of them and adding the water from the carafe. He watched the milkiness gather and spread, watched the absinthe-pale tide mount in the tumblers and the flat gold halo lie high along the rim. When he turned to them with their drinks in his hands, his lips were bunched up ruby-red under his neat little greying moustaches.

"You'd better not let on to Matilde," he said, tasting his

*pernod*. "She'd put it on to Sorrel."

Victoria took her drink in quick, nervous swallows, sitting on the edge of the divan by the firm, white languid body of Estelle who lay at rest in her black chiffon gown. The nail-file was busy in her fingers, but the china-blue eyes were examining Victoria, were turned in opaque speculation on her face, her hands, her breasts, her hair. She observed it all, scrutinized, considered without question, without a flicker of emotion the details of what Victoria's life had been.

"How long?" said Estelle lazily at last.

"I don't know," Victoria said. "Perhaps two months—I can't say exactly."

Estelle lifted her glass and sipped it evenly, her eyes unaltered over the thick tumbler's brim. (272–73)

Though Estelle is "examining" Victoria, *My Next Bride* is examining Estelle, describing her irrevocable yawn, uninterested manicure, and indifferent stare. Edmond's languorous pouring also attracts the narrative's attention, and his speech, which stresses Sorrel's feelings about the pregnancy, persists in making others' responses to the pregnancy the object of narrative inquiry:

"If it's Sorrel," Edmond went on, "Matilde will put you out in two minutes. She's done it before. There was Ruth," he said, and then he cocked his eye under the tufted brow at her. "And if it's anybody else," he said with the laughter beginning in his belly, "Sorrel himself won't like it. That would hurt his feelings more than anything." (273–74)

Here, Victoria, who has remained largely on the sidelines throughout this exchange, interjects, "'Of course it isn't Sorrel,' . . . She could scarcely believe that Edmond said this with any gravity" (274). But even this passing narration of Victoria's feelings focuses on Edmond's response, and quarreling with his misinterpretation, she intensifies the narrative's portrait of Estelle and Edmond's remoteness and lack of understanding.

Later scenes likewise draw attention to the lack of sympathy from Victoria's peers. When Victoria tries to talk to love interest Antony about the abortion, he either contradicts or ignores her: "But Antony was saying that the rich and the poor were not the issue"; "But Antony was talking about what they had done to him when he was too young to see it coming" (278, 281). When Victoria tells commune leader Sorrel about the abortion, he laughs at her for being like "all these Ameri-

can ladies [who] *must* have an operation” (306). Even the *sage-femme*, who agrees to perform Victoria’s abortion, comes under fire for her harshness: “she had no patience left for words that came to nothing. She wanted it said, and the figure stated and accepted once and for all, and the money paid her in advance” (300). With “her long, grey face unflickering, her soiled hands folded over, her eyes somber and small and sly” (301), the novel writes her lack of hygiene as part and parcel of her lack of sympathy, raising the stakes on her disregard. In *My Next Bride*, sympathy for women having abortions runs in short supply, and writing this series of unsympathetic replies as the rising action of its abortion plot, the novel imagines, sentimentally, that what is needed to resolve its protagonist’s abortion crisis is the right sympathetic response.

With the entrance of the inordinately sentimental Fontana Lister (the wife of Victoria’s love interest Antony), *My Next Bride* finds its resolution. Fontana, as Elkins likewise observes, “provides the real focus of the book.”<sup>32</sup> “Prettier and cleaner than any one else alive,” the feminine, weepy and charitable Fontana “cries like a bride” and “carries five or six bouquets because she always stops and gives one away to anyone who asks” (289, 162). Initially, a cynical Victoria distrusts the mawkish Fontana: “What I won’t have is pity,” Victoria thinks, “Fine ladies coming in with their gloves on to prod and poke at my wounds whatever they are” (290). Supposing the incompatibility of her modern sexuality and abortion with Fontana’s Angel of the House sentimentality, Victoria defiantly announces her abortion, using it as a litmus test to adjudicate sentimentalism’s (ir)relevance in the modern world:

She would give her the truth, like a dirty rag in her face; for once she would have it to fondle instead of the wolfhound in her ladylike hands. “I’m taking some pills,” she said. “I’m trying not to have a baby.”

Everything stopped moving in Fontana’s face. She sat there very quiet with the performance of gaiety gone from her mouth and out of her eyes even. There’s the door, said Victoria in silence. You’d better pick up your skirts and go. There’s the door, she said, and she held on tight to the poets’ bench to stop her shaking. (290–91)

Reversing the traditional sentimental structure wherein the weak prove themselves worthy of sympathy to the strong, Victoria demands that the strong prove themselves deserving of sympathy to the weak, that the sentimental legitimate their own sentimentality. Fontana, though,

is only momentarily taken aback by Victoria's news and, steadfast in her sympathy, insists upon accompanying Victoria to the livery: "I'll go with you. . . . You might faint somewhere alone" (292). Fontana's sympathy for Victoria in her attempts at an abortion ultimately win Victoria over, and Victoria gratefully demurs, "I like you" and "You're so good to me without any reason for being so good. Why do you do it?" (313). For *My Next Bride*, Fontana's sentimentalism justifies itself through its service to Victoria, the woman seeking an abortion, and thus materializing and evaluating sentimentalism in the context of an unwanted pregnancy, the novel advocates for sentimentalism's continued relevance to the social and personal conflicts attendant to modern sexuality and reproduction.

Having defended sentimentalism from modernist attacks on its obsolescence, *My Next Bride* writes its recovered sentimentalism as a strategy to rehabilitate and re-socialize women having abortions. Of greater concern to *My Next Bride* than the outcome of its protagonist's pregnancy is the outcome of her friendship with Fontana. As Boyle described *My Next Bride* in a letter to her agent, "It's a history of women and that nameless and nonsexual thing that can bind women to each other closer than can any relationship with men."<sup>33</sup> In keeping with this emphasis on the women's relationship, the final pages of the novel spend themselves narrating, not the events by which Fontana tracks down a qualified physician-abortionist, but rather, the proceedings of the women's inordinately sentimental slumber party, replete with a girlish game of dress-up (using Fontana's dog Boris), a giggling collapse, and a super-sweet cuddle:

"Oh, Boris, Boris!" [Fontana] cried out; and the two of them stood rocking with laughter, swaying like drunken women before the poor, white, injured dog.

. . . Victoria turned the gas out and they laid down on the narrow bed together. Fontana was laughing still, and she put her arm around Victoria's neck, and they went to sleep abruptly and still smiling, as if some kind of peace had been suddenly and at the same instant given to their hearts. (319–20)

Having brokered this relationship between the modern aborting woman and her paradigmatic Other, the sentimental Angel of the House, *My Next Bride* rests. The final scene describes the women in a cab en route to the doctor's office:

"When you wake up," Fontana said, "I'll be in the room waiting. It'll be exactly like any other day. It will be the way it was

waking up together in your room, only Boris won't be there with his shirt on." She was laughing, and she opened the paper up, and she said, "Look, it's June twenty-fourth, nineteen-thirty-four," and suddenly they both saw written across the top of the Paris-American paper: it was written "Prominent Young Club Man Cuts Veins In Father's Office," and in smaller letters below: "Antony Lister Takes Own Life. Wall Street Losses Rumoured."

The sun was shining on the Petit and on the Grand Palais; it was running like riches down the windows of the car.

"Don't cry. Antony said you never cried," said Fontana, a small, clear voice picking it up and putting it together and going on with it for ever. (320)

Victoria's uncharacteristic tears and Fontana's uncharacteristic stoicism fulfill Antony's prophecy that the women "could exchange things back and forth with each other. You [Victoria] could give her [Fontana] austerity or whatever it is across your forehead and she could give you things like tears" (162). Despite the tragedy of the conclusion, the fulfilling, conciliatory tenor of the final line suggests the promise of this sentimental transfer, and with best friend in tow and a newfound capacity to cry, Victoria leaves *My Next Bride* socialized and sentimentalized, groomed to reenter mainstream middle-class life.

Public opinion, though, was of course not the only problem facing depression-era women seeking abortions, and the sentimental solutions posed by "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride* are, no doubt, better suited to the needs of upper class women than to middle and working-class women for whom the problem of paying for an abortion was more keenly felt. In the 1930s, safe abortions could be bought. With enough money, women could—as Parker and Boyle both did<sup>34</sup>—get signed statements from physicians certifying that the abortion was necessary to the women's physical and mental health, and therewith, have a "therapeutic" abortion performed by a reputable physician in a regular hospital. Most women, however, lacked the money to pay the physicians' exorbitant fees, and for them, abortion meant unsafe, self-inflicted abortions, or abortions from non-medical practitioners whose competence varied.<sup>35</sup>

Such economic obstacles and differences are fantastically resolved by "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride*. In both works, ostensibly poor women manage to have expensive physician-performed abortions that would have been available only to the more well to do. In "Lady with a Lamp," the speaker overstates Mona's poverty and, in so doing, obfuscates the class contingency of her physician-performed abortion. Bemoaning Mona's insufficient home ("I worry so about you,

living in a little furnished apartment" [146]) and insufficient care ("And with only that colored Edie to take care of you" [145]), the speaker disregards the fact that Mona can afford a private apartment, personal maid, and an abortion performed by her regular doctor. Mislabeled Mona's class status and diverting attention away from the class particularity of her abortion, "Lady with a Lamp" grants an expensive physician-performed abortion to its supposedly "poor" heroine and thus downplays the class specificity of the depression-era abortion trade.

*My Next Bride's* assessment of Victoria's poverty is less of an overstatement. While Mona might not have any tray-cloths, Victoria doesn't even have electricity (9, 318). The room Victoria rents in the boarding house in Neuilly is "dirty and cold," with tattered and "stained" furnishings (17, 19, 10). From her job at the commune store, she earns only meager rations like burned carrots, oatmeal, and just "a little money besides" (54). Yet despite her serious poverty, Victoria has no trouble paying for an expensive physician-performed abortion. Never does she worry about doctors' fees, raising the subject to Fontana only after the abortion is arranged and then presumptively, as though her need for the money is enough to guarantee her claim on it: "You see, I'm leaving Sorrel and I haven't any money. I couldn't possibly pay a doctor. How could I pay one? I shall have to ask you to lend me money. And when I am well I will work and pay you back" (313). The cost of the abortion is, for *My Next Bride*, a mere afterthought.

For both "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride*, getting sympathy for an abortion is far more pressing and more difficult than getting the money to pay for it. It is an emphasis befitting narrative, since narrative generates and allocates sympathy far more handily than it generates and allocates revenue. It is also an emphasis with potentially dangerous political consequences; since by discounting the difficulties of affordable safe abortions, these texts not only raise false hopes, but also abjure a history of working-women's abortions and, in that way, threaten to foreclose a powerful locus of political mobilization. Though the economic hardships of the depression led to the increase in the use of abortion, from "Lady with a Lamp" and *My Next Bride* you wouldn't know it. In these works, money is no real problem, and thus while we might admire the ways these works redress sentimental rhetorics to modern reproductive politics, the radicalism of their appeals is tempered by their lack of class consciousness. In the end, Mary McCarthy's charge that *My Next Bride* falls into "the category of peep-hole, wish fulfillment literature"<sup>36</sup> turns out to be hard to shake.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Donald Ogden Stewart, *By a Stroke of Luck! An Autobiography* (New York: Paddington, 1975), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Michael Reynolds, *Hemingway: The American Homecoming* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 82.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Patterson Miller, "Ernest Hemingway and Dorothy Parker: 'Nothing in her life became her like her almost leaving of it,'" *North Dakota Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1999), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Hemingway, "To a Tragic Poetess—Nothing in her life became her like almost leaving it," in *88 Poems*, ed. Nicholas Gerogiannis (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 87–89.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Noonday, 1977), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine and Law in the United States, 1867–1973* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 1, 132, 113–59.

<sup>7</sup> As many of these depression-era abortion narratives correspond (some more closely than others) to the author's personal experiences with abortion, they are often read autobiographically as the author's own response to her abortion. On the "therapeutic power" of Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, see Nancy Hoffman, afterward to *Daughter of Earth* (New York: Feminist, 1987), 409. On Josephine Herbst's efforts "to keep her sister [who died from a botched abortion] alive through her writing," see Julia Ehrhardt, "Sisterhood Is Powerful: The Unhappy Marriage of Women's Writing and Women's Sexuality in Josephine Herbst's Fiction," in *Writers of Conviction: The Personal Politics of Zona Gale, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Rose Wilder Lane, and Josephine Herbst* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2004), 177. On Tess Slesinger's "healthy anger" in *The Unpossessed*, see Shirley Biagi, "Forgive Me For Dying," *The Antioch Review* 35 (1977), 227.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the plot of maternal choice in contemporary fiction about abortion, see Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Josephine Herbst, *Money for Love* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1929); Tess Slesinger, "Missis Flinders," in *The Unpossessed* (1934; reprint, New York: Feminist, 1984), 339–57; Margery Latimer, *This Is My Body* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1930); Josephine Herbst, *The Executioner Waits* (1934; repr. New York: Warner, 1985); William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1990); William Faulkner, "That Evening Sun,"

in *Collected Stories* (1931; repr. New York: Vintage, 1995), 289–309. For a discussion of the abortion subject matter in Faulkner's "That Evening Sun," see E. W. Pitcher, "Motive and Metaphor in Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (1981), 131–35; Langston Hughes, "Cora Unashamed," in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934; repr. New York: Vintage, 1990), 3–18.

<sup>10</sup> *Dr. Monica*, VHS, directed by William Keighley (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1934); *Men In White*, VHS, directed by Richard Boleslawski (Culver City, CA: MGM, 1934); Sidney Kingsley, *Men In White* (New York: Covici Friede, 1933); *Ann Vickers*, VHS, directed by John Cromwell (1933; Culver City, CA: Turner Home Entertainment, 1989); Sinclair Lewis, *Ann Vickers* (New York: Collier, 1932).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Marion Meade, *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 105, and John Keats, *You Might As Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Sondra Melzer, *The Rhetoric of Rage: Women in Dorothy Parker* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 31, 37, 29; Meade, *Dorothy Parker*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Parker, "Mr. Durant," in *Complete Stories* (1924; repr. New York: Penguin, 1995), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jane Trahey, *Harper's Bazaar: 100 Years of the American Female* (New York: Random, 1967), 90.

<sup>15</sup> Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 49–51, 23; Linda Myrssiades, *Splitting the Baby: The Culture of Abortion in Literature and Law, Rhetoric and Cartoons* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 23–24.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Parker, "Lady with a Lamp," in *Complete Stories* (1932; repr. New York: Penguin, 1995), 144, 145. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>17</sup> A. J. Rongy, *Abortion: Legal or Illegal?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1933), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick J. Taussig, review of *Abortion: Legal or Illegal* by A. J. Rongy, *Birth Control Review*, June 1933, 153.

<sup>19</sup> Ogden Nash, "The Pleasure Is Ours," review of *After Such Pleasures* by Dorothy Parker, *Saturday Review of Literature*, Nov. 4, 1933, 231; "Hemingway and Parker," review of *Winner Take All* by Ernest Hemingway and *After Such Pleasures* by Dorothy Parker, *North American Review*, Jan. 1934, 94.

<sup>20</sup> "Dorothy Parker's Stories and Other Recent Works of Fiction," review of *After Such Pleasures* by Dorothy Parker, *New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 29, 1933, 6; Elizabeth Majerus, *Prior Commitments: Multiply Affiliated Women Writers and Modernism's Shifting Boundaries* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Illinois, 2001), 255.

<sup>21</sup> On modernists' formal experiments with sentimentalism, see Suzanne Clark,

*Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991); Rhonda Pettit, *A Gendered Collision: Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2000); Victor Strandberg, "Sentimentality and Social Pluralism in American Literature," in *Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture*, ed. Winfried von Heget (Tübingen: Narr, 1991), 150–75; Howard Fulweiler, "Here a Captive Heart Busted": *Studies in the Sentimental Journey of Modern Literature* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1993). According to Jessica Burstein scholars of modern fiction ought to pay more attention to the cultural productivity of modern sentimentalism. See Jessica Burstein, "A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé," *American Literary History* 14 (2002), 229.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Whipple Spanier, *Kay Boyle: Artist and Activist* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1986), 88.

<sup>23</sup> Donna Hollenberg, "Abortion, Identity Formation, and the Expatriate Woman Writer: H. D. and Kay Boyle in the Twenties," in *Critical Essays on Kay Boyle*, ed. Marilyn Elkins (New York: G. K. Hall, 1997), 224. For Boyle's account of the abortion she had in 1928, see *Being Geniuses Together 1920–1930*, co-written with Robert McAlmon (1968; repr. San Francisco: North Point, 1984). For her account of the abortion she had in 1921, see her essay in *The Choices We Made: 25 Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion*, ed. Anna Bonavoglia (New York: Random, 1991), 17–22.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Elkins, introduction to *Critical Essays on Kay Boyle*, ed. Marilyn Elkins (New York: G. K. Hall, 1997), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Spanier, introduction to *Process*, by Kay Boyle (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001), xi.

<sup>26</sup> Spanier, *Kay Boyle: Artist and Activist*, 710, 25–26, 174, 179.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth S. Bell, *Kay Boyle: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Edith H. Walton, "Miss Boyle's Irony," *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 11, 1934, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Mary McCarthy, "Romance of Paris," *Nation*, Dec. 26, 1934, 747.

<sup>30</sup> Kay Boyle, *My Next Bride* (1934; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 276–77. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>31</sup> Gertrude Stein, "The Good Anna," in *Three Lives*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (1909; repr. New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000), 37–86; Edith Wharton, *Summer* (1917; repr. New York: Berkley, 1981); Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants," in *Men Without Women* (1927; repr. New York: Scribner's, 1997), 50–55; Viña Delmar, *Bad Girl* (New York: Harcourt, 1928).

<sup>32</sup> Elkins, *Metamorphosing the Novel: Kay Boyle's Narrative Innovations* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 50.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Hugh Ford, *Four Lives in Paris* (San Francisco: North Point, 1987), 223.

<sup>34</sup> Keats, *You Might As Well Live*, 90; Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together 1920–30*, 320–22.

<sup>35</sup> Sue Clegg and Rita Gough, "The Struggle for Abortion Rights," in *Class Struggle and Social Welfare*, ed. Michael Lavalette and Gerry Mooney (New York: Routledge, 2000), 155; Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime*, 137–38.

<sup>36</sup> McCarthy, "Romance of Paris," 747.

