

CRISTINA DI MAIO

All Is Fair in Play and War: A Ludic Reading of Conflictual Dynamics in Three Short Stories by Grace Paley

But most women in our P.T.A. were independent – by necessity and disposition. We were, in fact, the soft-speaking tough souls of anarchy.
(Grace Paley, “Friends”)

Grace Paley (1922-2007) spent a lifetime coping with the difficult task of being a poet, a writer, a mother, a woman, and an activist. Sometimes she struggled, and she was not afraid or ashamed of admitting it, even through her art. Still, her maiden name was Goodside, and this innate positivity was probably what pushed her to keep facing that hard challenge and win it, on her own terms. She thought that being a versatile human being and a committed person was not only inevitable for her, but also would make her an even better mother – and she claimed this vision through her artistic production as well. Paley’s biographer, Judith Arcana, in fact, remarks how Grace Paley chose to embrace her motherhood and her activism and integrate them both in her writing, thus challenging “the romantic image of the (archetypically male) artist as lonely seeker and interpreter of truth and beauty” (80). Her fictional, semi-autobiographical world is mostly populated by mothers who must deal with children, teachers, working hours, chores, sentimental troubles, social interactions and even political activism all at once; in doing so, she integrated all of her life experience into her writing and managed to reach a considerable share of readers, who similarly attempt to balance the maternal experience with their own individuality and personal goals.

These issues, then, are crucial within Paley’s production and have inevitably called critics’ attention to her depiction of motherhood as a

creative claim against patriarchal institutions (Accardo, Piloni, Chaskes), as well as to her distinctive Jewishness (Goffmann, Hammerman-Seidman, Heller), her destabilization of gender models, the value of storytelling (Aarons, Wilde, Clark), and activism (Newman, Chaskes, Brandel). Nonetheless, it is remarkable how little attention has been paid so far to the function of play in Paley's short fiction, despite the numerous moments of play that her characters share with their children. This is particularly striking if we consider the cultural significance of play itself: mothers' most meaningful interactions with their children take place also through play, and it is through play that children begin to experience the world, learn the dynamics of its social interactions, and discover/shape their own identity. Moreover, play presents a twofold nature – both a free, primeval impulse and a social practice regulated by precise rules and having a final goal – so that, through play, fundamental social dynamics and conflicts are displayed. The characters in Paley's short stories are frequently portrayed as in conflict with their social order, caught between their natural instinct to play creatively and their duty to conform to their social roles; society itself, with its performative norms and seemingly inescapable dynamics, can be read as a macrocosm of play, in which all actors seek fulfillment, while at the same time they are expected to adjust to conventional roles that limit their potential – as Eric Berne effectively argued, interpreting social situations as a field of play. The play-element becomes a mirror and a metaphor of these aspects in Paley's short stories. A further reason for considering play as crucial is that due to its complex nature, it acts as a connection between motherhood and the artistic, political, and social fields: as mothers raise their children while balancing free moments of creativity and the setting of shared rules, artistic work implies agreeing to a certain degree of rigor and order, and both political and social interactions are built on the same dialectics of creative participation, on one hand, and acknowledgement of existing rules, on the other.

In this article, I focus on the overlooked but crucial theme of play in Paley's short stories by defining the concepts of "ludic" and "agonal" in play theory and by using them as a key to an understanding of three stories foregrounding the element of play: "A Subject of Childhood," "Ruthy and Edie," and "Faith in a Tree." This analysis will be based on Johan Huizinga's

work *Homo Ludens*. Written in 1938 and a cornerstone of game studies, the book explores the play-element in culture¹ in an interdisciplinary way, studying its origins, structure, and evolution over the centuries. Although Huizinga's study dates back to several decades ago, it still represents the most analytical treatment of play and its connection with culture, and the chapters that Huizinga devotes to the influence of play on the dynamics of conflict and wars are crucial to my ludic reading of Paley's texts. More specifically, I contend that in these short stories conflict is constantly generated by the inward and outward pressure to kill the creative impulse to play, in favor of a more conventional and normalized behavior. I will also establish whether these conflicts can be described as agonal in nature; in this perspective, Michel Foucault's study of power dynamics and normalization will also be relevant, as well as Eric Berne's analysis of social transactions as "games." Lastly, I will focus on Huizinga's figure of the *spoilsport* as a possible solution to conflicts in a ludic sense, underlining how this may take place at two distinct levels – both within the text and as a message to the reader, embedded in the story.

The drive for play seems to underlie the characters' actions and their exchanges in many of Paley's short stories: mothers invent unconventional, impromptu games to grant their children a necessary share of light-heartedness in frequently gloomy circumstances; women use ironic, witty language to dispel their untenable living conditions and their frustrated aspirations; moreover, these women conceive inventive, playful ways to voice their protest against a social order that discourages their efforts to improve their lives and the lives of other disadvantaged people. Therefore, one is justified in assuming that play is an important thematic element in Paley's world, and that it carries some of the complexity and the manifold implications thinkers have explored throughout the centuries. The play drive, in fact, has been an object of philosophical speculation since classical antiquity: Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle showed an interest in it, recognizing it as a primary, irrevocable instinct in animals and human beings alike. After several centuries, the concept was resumed by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* and shortly after by Schiller, who in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* expanded Kant's analysis and bestowed a great power on play, defining the play drive as a harmonious combination

of the sensuous and the formal, and thus reconciled man's inner dichotomy between reason and passion. Although many scholars have dealt with play and its significance in various fields of study – pedagogy, psychology, linguistics, mathematics – the first systematic anthropological study of play was carried out, as previously mentioned, by Johan Huizinga, whose book deeply influenced Roger Caillois' sociological work *Men, Play and Games* (1961), wherein he classifies games into four separate categories according to their dominant characteristics. These two groundbreaking books started a discussion that resulted in the birth of a new field of academic inquiry known as Game Studies, but they nonetheless failed to generate a sustained attention to the interactions between play and literary texts. Game studies, in fact, grew in the late-twentieth century to encompass a deeper understanding of the videogame phenomenon and generated three main approaches: social science, humanities, and industrial engineering. The humanities approach, which would seem to be the one most relevant to literature, considers play from two points of view, the ludological one and the narratological one: the former focuses on the player's immersive experience in the game and on the meaning and impact that play has on the player, while the latter focuses mainly on storytelling within the game or, more specifically, within videogames. Hence, a comprehensive framework for the relationship between play and literature is not available to date; therefore, in this paper I will mainly refer to Huizinga's treatise because of the crucial importance of his analysis in the field and of the wide-ranging nature of his study. Additionally, Huizinga's work offers relevant reflections on the competitive nature of play, which will deeply inform my reading of the three short stories I consider, wherein I investigate the cultural significance and ludic value of the contrasts between Paley's protagonists, on one hand, and various emanations of the social order, on the other.

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga states that all human activities are, to some extent, permeated with play. He defines play as

a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social

groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (13)

Therefore, the ludic element acts for Huizinga as a common denominator for a great deal of activities which might not be immediately related to play in everyday life. For instance, it can be detected both in serious and in fun activities, as both attitudes can be distinctive features of a game; similarly, play-elements characterize rituals (including religious ones) and politics, namely political elections, not to mention art, poetry, and music – all of which connect play with beauty, which Huizinga identifies as another distinguishing feature of play. Many scholars have criticized Huizinga's wide interpretation of play as too broad (Ehrmann et al., 31) and, at the same time, too narrow. For example, Roger Caillois argues that Huizinga's work is too focused on the competitive side of play, and this is one of the reasons why he decided to expand his analysis and undertake a classification of play into different categories.

Huizinga's perception of the ludic as an element that both cannot be confined to a single domain and eludes categorization is crucial to my critical perspective, since it reinforces the idea that several life experiences in Paley's short stories – namely motherhood, storytelling, artistic creation, and anti-war activism – may all be welded together by the play-element as a single cultural link. Moreover, the importance Huizinga gives to the competitive aspect of play is particularly relevant to a thorough interpretation of the conflictual moments that occur in the stories whenever the possibility to play according to shared, fair rules is denied. This view rests on the assumption that conflict may present a ludic factor when it is conceived as an agonal one. Huizinga speaks extensively about agonal conflict in his book, recognizing the agonistic attitude as one of the most ancient and genuine forms of play in a culture, which gave form and meaning to primitive games played for the sake of prestige. However, to be defined as truly "agonal", a contest (be it a playful wrestle, a dispute in a lawsuit, or even a war) must display some specific characteristics: for instance, it must be played between two distinct parties or teams that will be driven by a tension to win; prestige, glory, and a will to excel and show one's own superiority must be at stake; rules must be shared and accepted by both parties. From this viewpoint, a contest that does

not present these features cannot be read as a ludic one, that is, as a cultural process aimed at the two players' personal growth and at increasing their social prestige. Rather, it will be a struggle between the obstructionist agent of a repressive apparatus and an independent thinking subject who eventually chooses to react firmly and create a space of freedom that restores ludic value in and beyond the conflict. In addition to Huizinga's concepts of ludic and agonal play, Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power and Eric Berne's view of dysfunctional social interactions will provide a crucial theoretical context for my reading of the confrontational dynamics occurring in the three Paley's short stories. Foucault's reading of normalizing techniques will be fundamental to my critical examination of some characters' repressive intent towards Paley's heroines. My critical interpretation rests on the assumption that the ways in which repressive dynamics act on individuals are similar to the ways in which unshared rules act on players in a game: that is, they frustrate the players' creative potentials and trap them in socially prescribed roles. My analysis examines the social roles that Paley's characters (specifically women and children) play in the stories, considering whether their play drive is actually allowed to flourish. Establishing a connection between Huizinga's play theory and Foucault's analysis of power's operation enables me to explore how disciplinary power exerts in the short stories a restrictive normative pressure, which prevents the players-characters from seeking fulfillment and perceiving play as an act of liberation. By exercising various forms of coercion on bodies and rituals, and by imposing a set of performative rules on human beings, disciplinary power aims at controlling individuals, making their actions and their actions' outcomes predictable. Disciplinary power also aims at isolating dysfunctional elements from the community of players, thus annihilating their chances of subverting unshared, prescriptive rules and changing the predictable outcome of the game. This Foucauldian angle will be essential to shedding light on the implications that play dynamics have for Paley's characters, and it will provide the critical framework needed for a thorough understanding of the powers at stake, whenever seemingly ordinary moments of play occur in the three short stories I consider. Furthermore, Berne's interpretation of social interactions as a game of strategy will help me to unveil the unspoken impulses behind some of the characters' actions.

By reading "A Subject of Childhood," "Ruthy and Edie," and "Faith in

a Tree” in parallel with Huizinga’s theory of play, I focus on agonal ludic practice in the stories, establishing whether the stories’ protagonists are actually allowed to play and whether seemingly agonal confrontations truly present a ludic significance. Resting on Huizinga’s assumption that pure agonal practice resists any form of instrumental purpose and is based on shared rules, I claim that in these stories Paley’s characters systematically face impediments to play; through a Foucauldian interpretation of confrontational dynamics, I further argue that this obstructionism is carried out by both single repressive agents and representatives of the institutions, at both an individual and a collective level. I will then claim that the connection between Paley’s direct involvement in both social and political activism and her characters is reinforced through the figure of the spoilsport, who reacts to society’s constraining injunctions and finds a ludic and creative solution to express his/her frustrated ludic potential, which leads to unexpected outcomes in the texts and operates outside of them, directly appealing to the reader.

In “A Subject of Childhood” the struggle between genuine play drive and disciplinary will is so crucial that the short story represents a parable of repression, generating unforeseen violence. “A Subject of Childhood” is the second of a couple of stories collected under the title “Two Short Sad Stories from a Long and Happy Life.” The story takes place on a Saturday in Faith Darwin’s apartment.² Faith is at home with her firstborn Richard and his little brother Tonto when Clifford, Faith’s lover, decides to engage in a playful fight with the boys: this leads to an unfortunate incident in which both Clifford and the children are hurt, followed by a serious argument that eventually puts an end to Faith’s relationship with the man, leaving her alone to her chores and the care of her children.

The short story opens on an idyllic description of domestic harmony: Richard is peacefully drawing, Tonto is playing with a plastic horse, and Faith is re-sewing the hem of the previous year’s skirt “in order to be up to the minute, chic and *au courant* in the midst of spring. Strangers would murmur, ‘Look at her, isn’t she wonderful? Who’s her couturier?’”(91). In short, all the members of the little family are engaging in creative activities which appear to help them overcome and minimize the bleakness of an unprivileged situation – in fact, the kids do not seem to possess any fancy

toys, and Faith is altering her clothes because, as a single mother, she is barely able to sustain her household's daily expenses. Yet they appear happy to be together, enjoying each other's company and creating (or recreating) something beautiful, according to their own talents.

The living room harmony is interrupted when Clifford bursts into the scene: he storms into the room after a shower, in which he had been cheerfully singing, and he is presented as "strong and happy ... a steaming emanation ... his eyes were round and dark, amazed. This Clifford, my close friend, was guileless. He would not hurt a fly and he was a vegetarian" (91). The depiction of Clifford as a positive hero continues with Faith stating that he is always glad to see them and referring to him as "gleaming and pleasant"; besides, as he enters the room, he playfully lets the towel with which he had covered himself after the shower fall on the floor. Faith, though, does not like his joke and asks him to cover himself. To her words, Clifford reacts in a conciliatory, relaxed way ("Take it easy, Faith," he called to the ear of reason, 'the world is changing'[92]), but soon lays the ground for the subsequent battle, which will leave several wounded on the field and infuriate Faith's otherwise peaceful army against him. Clifford's first words in the story declare his real intent: when the man drops the towel, showing his naked body to the whole living room audience, his merry yet authoritative words are "Behold the man!" According to this seemingly incontestable declaration, Clifford's body, his behavior, and his opinions are thus to be regarded as the institutional expression of masculinity and not to be questioned. It is probably no accident, then, that this assertion of normative manhood irritates Faith, the busy mother of two young boys, who tries to teach them to "hold an open heart on the subjects of childhood" (94).

Right after his peremptory physical display, Clifford enthusiastically starts his crusade to "masculinize" little Richard and Tonto: he interrupts the two kids' activities, trying to talk them into starting a fight. "Wake up, wake up. What's everyone slouching around for?' He poked Richard in the tummy. 'A little muscle tone here, boy. Wake up'" (92). What looks like an invitation to play proves to be in fact a heteronormative injunction that criticizes the attitude of both children, and especially Richard, who is older and whose personality is complex enough for him to understand (and

become annoyed by) Clifford's remarks. While ostensibly joking, Clifford is actually addressing him in a way that blames the child's hypothetical laziness, unseemliness, and inadequate physical fitness. His way of sitting is unsuitable, the activity he enjoys performing is not appropriate for his gender, even his child's limbs are displayed incorrectly (since he is not sitting up straight), nor is he showing any willingness to prove his masculinity. The specific focus on the body in this paragraph recalls Foucault's point that the body cannot escape being the object of political pressure: as a result, its postures, performances, and interactions are subject to what he terms a moral orthopedics, that is, a constant social control exercised by the various agents imposing discipline through several techniques (*Discipline and Punish* 135-141). Clifford's injunctions immediately qualify him as an agent of moral orthopedics, on a mission to assert the criteria of what should be considered normal and proper. As such, Clifford will thus use his own body as an instrument for this task, homosocially exhibiting it as a normative example of masculinity; he will address the two boys, who incidentally lack a father to instruct them on how to embrace their manly duties, and consequently identify Faith as his enemy, since she is guilty of trying to raise her children in a way that does not respect any of the Foucauldian directives – a transgression she will have to account for.

In this perspective, the nature of the game that Clifford is proposing, i.e. wrestling, is quite important. Besides being a homosocial and surreptitiously homoerotic exhibition, inevitably appealing to the children's inner instinct to look up to a surrogate dad/alpha male, wrestling is one of the many games which receive Huizinga's attention in *Homo Ludens*. In his book, the author devotes a whole chapter to war, with the aim of investigating its ludic value: he merges simulated (playful or ritual) combats and war in a single powerful display of cultural ludic significance.³ According to Huizinga both wrestling and simulated, competitive fights have a strong cultural significance when meant to prove which participant has the highest value (the highest motivation and/or the highest value system). Annihilation and supremacy over the enemy should not be the final goal of a war, as war is an agonistic, somewhat dialectical contest between two opposite forces. Instead, the final goal should be recognition, glory, and prestige. According to Huizinga, then,

although they can both be reconciled in a single primeval concept of play, both wars and playful fights can be considered as having “cultural function so long as [they are] waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights” (89). Huizinga further argues that “the agonistic element only becomes operative when the war-making parties regard themselves and each other as antagonists contending for something to which they feel they have a right” (90). If we consider Clifford’s invitation to play/wrestle, it is easy to notice that the potential participants in the game, namely Clifford and the two boys, do not share either equal rights, rules, or incentives. Therefore, given these premises, the game which is about to take place will not have any ludic significance, but will rather be configured as an ambush on the children and will conceal Clifford’s plan to censor, dominate, and re-educate them.

Richard, described by his mother Faith as a mature and reflective little boy, originally frustrates Clifford’s injunctions by simply replying that he is not interested in any sort of fight and wants to keep drawing. Clifford, however, pushes him: he reminds the boy that he is not always around for them to play with, thus calling on Richard’s sense of duty and responsibility (to Huizinga, a genuine part of a chivalric system of ludic values). Once again, it is crucial to notice that Clifford’s retort is uttered in such a way as to suggest that he is making himself available for the children, who should be eager to play with him, whereas he is in fact trying to stop them from enjoying their free time in the “dysfunctional” ways they have chosen and lure them into a fight. Little Tonto, though, accepts the challenge, both because his young age makes him a more malleable target and partly because of his great need to identify his mother’s friend with a paternal figure. The two engage in a lively, playful wrestling match, and soon Richard, who always acts proud but is eventually overtly jealous of his little brother, joins them. Tonto is also the one who starts the degeneration of the game, kicking Clifford in the shin and triggering the spiral of aggressiveness that will end in a scuffle and be the cause of Faith’s ultimate argument with her lover. Nonetheless, Clifford had been the one proposing such a violent game to two children, both of whom initially had *no intention of playing it*, without even knowing how to keep the level of their excitement under control.

After several kicks and blows, in fact, the “game” ends with Clifford – an adult man of a certain weight – collapsing on the two kids, who are evidently the only persons who were at risk of getting seriously hurt. Faith immediately checks first on Tonto, then on Richard, and finally on Clifford, who has been begging her for help like a real victim. Becoming a victim is actually his triumph: he is now able to use this position to blame Faith for being a bad mother, unloading on her his frustration for his inability to build a healthy relationship with her children. This tendentious attitude may be interpreted as a wicked game, as theorized in Eric Berne’s *Games People Play*, particularly the game the author calls “Kick Me.” In his 1964 milestone book, Berne considers “games” as including all of the social transactions which involve a set of acts (linguistic or not) that follow a predictable pattern. Berne identifies those acts as proper *moves* in a game, which eventually have a *payoff* – normally in the form of sympathy or acknowledgement, or what Berne calls emotional *caresses*. Although some may think of social interaction as a game of strategy, Berne argues that players are generally unaware of the fact that they are playing, while simultaneously finding themselves urged to play by the intensity of their own feelings. Moreover, winning does not necessarily imply an improvement in the players’ condition or an evolution of their self: the pattern they follow frequently perpetuates itself also because of the players’ unawareness and consequent inability to break the ritual, leading to adverse and counterproductive effects. The game “Kick Me” is one of the many analyzed in Berne’s book, and its name is surprisingly appropriate to Clifford’s beating in Paley’s story. In this game the player’s social demeanor is the equivalent of wearing a sign that reads “Please Don’t Kick Me.” Obviously, as a result of this restriction, the temptation to kick becomes almost uncontrollable, and when kicked, the player pathetically complains about his/her inescapable destiny. Berne remarks that this tragic game is frequently played by paranoids, and very likely by people who have lost their job and jilted men as well.

Clifford jumps at the opportunity of reaping the benefits of his performance in a “Kick Me” match right after the scuffle, announcing to Faith that they need to have a “serious talk.” His intent is twofold: both receiving “caresses” for the violent reaction he has caused and relieving

himself of all responsibility or potential commitment as a stepfather by accusing Faith: “I can’t really take those kids. I mean, Faith, you know I’ve tried and tried. But you’ve done something to them, corrupted their instincts in some way or other” (94). Clifford’s accusation here is vague (“in some way or other”), approximate (for instance, he omits the basic circumstance that Faith is a single mother with financial problems who is raising her children with little or no support by their father) and defensive, even though Faith has not shown any animosity or willingness to accuse him in her turn. Reading between the lines, one might even assume that the expression “corrupted their instincts” here hints at a possible latent homosexuality of the two kids, who handle their inclination for violence in an ambivalent way because of Faith’s hegemony as a single parent and her style of motherhood.

Clifford then goes on:

Here we were; having an absolutely marvelous time, rolling around making all kinds of free noise, and look what happened – like every other time, someone got hurt. I mean I’m really hurt. We should have all been relaxed. Easy. It should have been all easy. Our bodies should have been so easy. No one should’ve been hurt, Faith. (94)

This passage is disturbingly similar to a passive-aggressive closing argument, which mystifies the nature of the facts presented: Richard and Tonto had not displayed any interest in participating in the game that Clifford was trying to propose/impose, therefore the definition “marvelous time” seems completely inapplicable. The explicit mention of the “bodies” recalls the Foucauldian theme and emphasizes the body as an element on which repressive apparatuses (here disguised as ludic proposals) operate; moreover, the verb “should” is repeated four times in three lines, underlining a clear intent to control the game and discipline the players’ bodies. However, the body is not the only element that invites a Foucauldian reading. Clifford is overtly assuming the role of a judge entitled to giving verdicts not only on Faith’s maternal practice, but her inner self as well, *through* her children’s behavior. The reader here witnesses a summary trial with a clear *normalizing* purpose, as described by Foucault:

In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences. (184)

Faith, well aware of Clifford's final goal, asks him if he thinks that she is the one to blame for the earlier incident, and after his triple offensive reply (he defines Faith's job with her children as "rotten," "lousy," "stinking"), the woman starts what she calls "a compendium of motivations and griefs":

For I have raised those kids, with one hand typing behind my back to earn a living. I have raised them alone without a father to identify themselves with in the bathroom like all the other little boys in the playground. ... I have stuck by it despite the encroachments of kind relatives who offer ski pants, piano lessons, tickets to the rodeo. Meanwhile I have serviced Richard and Tonto, taught them to keep clean and hold an open heart on the subjects of childhood. We have in fact risen mightily from toilets in the hall and scavenging in great cardboard boxes at the Salvation Army for underwear and socks. It has been my perversity to do this alone. (94-95)

Faith's reaction is an acceptance of responsibility, as well as a defensive plea for her achievements as a working single mother, who, despite all difficulties and all of her flaws, has provided for the daily care of her offspring and managed to teach them a lesson that goes well beyond the ordinary mother duties: "hold[ing] an open heart on the subjects of childhood" is a priceless gift to her children, which will stay as a key to their interpretation of the world for life and will act as a crowbar to break society's normalizing cages and react ludically to its challenges. Faith claims legitimacy for her style of mothering, while at the same time identifying the relevance of motherhood as a political practice: in Accardo's words, "The maternal practice, with the responsibility that stems from it ... is a tool to demolish the premises of motherhood as a patriarchal institution:

it represents a drive towards political commitment aimed at ensuring a better future for young people”⁴ (*L'arte di ascoltare* 73).

Faith, however, does not voice her “compendium” to Clifford, because she does not acknowledge him as a legitimate judge. The only way in which she reacts is by throwing a glass ashtray at him, “entirely apart from [her] personal decision,” tearing off his earlobe. Such a violent act seems to contrast with Annalucia Accardo’s depiction of Paley’s heroines – “The women narrators and protagonists of her stories, mothers and friends, ... are determined to do everything that is in their power to put a stop to violence”⁵ (“Mi baciò con cattiveria” 49); nevertheless, it can be argued that Faith’s (and Richard’s before) violent reaction is an extreme act of rebellion which only takes place once the Foucauldian repressive enemy is recognized as such, and after all diplomatic attempts have failed. Originally peaceful, Richard and later Faith just cannot cope with the idea of succumbing to a disciplining agent who is actively trying to discredit the way they have chosen to deploy their creative potential, and who is moreover depriving them of their precious, painfully earned freedom to play according to their own rules: the stakes are too high. This is why their reaction is one of plain rejection and even physical aggressiveness. These feelings answer the call of an insuppressible anger – the anger of those who realize that the rules of the game have been set by repressive agents who do not want the competition to be genuine but rather only desire for the power dynamics to reproduce themselves. It is the rage of honest players who realize they will always be the losers in the game, because the rules are flawed from the very beginning.

If in “A Subject of Childhood” anger rises to a climax and subsequently drops, in “Ruthy and Edie” readers see the same rage rising and flourishing, this time not against a single emanation of disciplining power, but against a whole system of institutions sabotaging *fair play* and, consequently, its cultural value and the horizon of possibilities it opens. Out of this rage, more productive and revolutionary reactions will follow.

“One day in the Bronx two small girls named Edie and Ruthy were sitting on the stoop steps. They were talking about the real world of boys” (Ruthy and Edie, 337): this is the ironic *incipit* of “Ruthy and Edie,” a 1985 short story published in the collection *Later The Same Day*. As Alan

Wilde remarks in his essay “Grace Paley’s World-Inventing Words,” these words are certainly not neutral, but rather “a phrase sardonically intended to suggest the prevailing ideological atmosphere of the girl’s working and middle class Bronx neighborhood” (173). From the beginning, we know that this story will be characterized by a fresh, feminine perspective on a series of dynamics which determine the only world ironically described as “real” – the boys’ world. The opening conversation between the two girls centers on children’s activities and games. Specifically, Ruthy believes the boys’ lifestyle to be much more exciting, given all the lively activities they are allowed to carry out (“run around the block a lot, ha[ve] races, and play ... war on the corner” [337]), although Edie does not share this view, since one of the boys’ favorite occupations is pulling up girls’ skirts, and as for the running and the racing, she states that all in all it “wasn’t *that* good.” In these opening lines, we see something significant happen in a very carefree way: two girls, embodying two different aspects of the female experience, establish a non-conflictual dialogue which has the genuine aim of generating new, freer perspectives on being a little girl, in the Bronx, at the end of the twentieth century. At a first glance, in fact, the two girls seem to embody (or rather, to have interiorized) the two heteronormative models all children are subjected to: Edie seems to comply with a feminine gender model as analyzed by Simone de Beauvoir, even in her body language (in addition, later in the short story she states that the main reason why she does not want to fight for her country is having to leave her mother), while Ruthy looks closer to a tomboy model, advertising masculinity as a triumphant gateway to endless freedom and adventure. Paley goes beyond this dualistic vision of gender, portraying Edie as a girl who still claims her sensitivity⁶ and Ruthy’s yearning for epic adventure as a further injunction to replicate an impossible, manly model of bravery. As a matter of fact, we are told that “Ruthy was a big reader and most interesting reading was about bravery – for instance Roland’s Horn at Roncevaux” (337). Her father had been a brave soldier and she declares she loves her country, which she would be proud to fight and die for. Still, all her boldness vanishes when the two girls see a dog trotting towards them. Ruthy cannot help running inside the house in such pure terror that she refuses to open the door to let poor Edie in, too. The author here uses her

irony to ridicule the emphasis placed on chivalric literature which exalts masculine characteristics of war, as Alan Wilde remarks:

Paley means to imply not that either Ruthy's fear or her reaction is implausible but, rather, that reading about Roland's Horn at Roncevaux has hardly prepared her to face the more commonplace dangers of her ordinary life. Consequently, if the irony is partly at Ruthy's expense, it is aimed far more directly at the ideas she has ingested in her emulation of "the real world of boys", the shadow and precursor, as the remainder of the story makes clear, of the equally false and more pernicious world of men. (174)

Nonetheless, it can be argued that the *chansons de gestes* Ruthy is nurtured with are still somewhat culturally relevant. From a Huizinga point of view, the concept of chivalric dispute follows some ludic patterns. For instance, it is generally declared, it is carried out with justice and in the presence of witnesses, it requires the performance of a given set of rituals (similar to religious ceremonies), and while it may be violent, its final goal is restoring honor and resolving disputes in ways that limit the bloodshed. Huizinga points out, "Even if it were no more than a fiction, these fancies of war as a noble game of honor and virtue have still played an important part in developing civilization, for it is from them that the idea of chivalry sprang and hence, ultimately, of international law" (96). These features of the chivalric dispute are crucial to interpreting Ruthy and Edie's ludic vision of conflict in this short story: in the second part of the story, the reader learns how Ruthy's romantic ideal is not simply shattered when facing the harshness of reality – in which the basic rules of an honorable fight are neglected – but it is converted into a positive drive operating at a social level, in the claim for social equality and civil rights. In my reading of this part of the story, particular attention will be devoted to an episode in which this drive is channeled in political activism: a demonstration to stop the Vietnam war, which is perceived by Ruthy and her friends as illegitimate and essentially wrong. Ruthy's romantic commitment and spirit of self-sacrifice as a child⁷ thus turn into a demand for meaning, fairness in conflict and, above all, peace.

Right after the dog incident, the story jumps forward almost forty years, and we meet Ruthy and Edie again in Ruthy's Manhattan apartment, where

they are celebrating Ruthy's fiftieth birthday with their friends Ann and Faith. The four women are baking cakes, while recalling old anecdotes and discussing the education of children, the situation in New York, human rights, and current events, in a unique intertwining of global and local, personal and political which is undoubtedly Paley's distinctive hallmark. Towards the end of the short story, Ann tells an anecdote that seems to connect Ruthy's childhood love for chivalry to her later antimilitarist political activism, which both share a ludic attitude. She recalls a demonstration which had taken place many years earlier, during which Ruthy had acted as an actual chivalric hero(ine). The demonstrators were sitting peacefully to protest against the war, facing the police and their horses who were under orders to maintain law and order; on this occasion, after the horses started to rear and the police to knock people on their backs and heads, Ruthy dared to stand up to the police captain, grabbing him "by his gold buttons" and shouting at him to "Get your goddamn cavalry out of here." Horses and cavalry immediately evoke Roland and his feats, only in a reversed perspective, since the heroes here are the ones who are unarmed and on foot, proudly defending their ideals and serving no master, standing their ground in sharp contrast with previously unquestioned mainstream values.

In their fight against repressive authority, Ruthy and her friends symmetrically reaffirm their dedication to the chivalric cause in an even more honorable context, which aims at claiming human rights and rejecting violence. Ruthy's childhood potential for a ludic, agonal conflict does not fade over the years; on the contrary, it intensifies. In the demonstration, she is portrayed as an unconventional, disheveled, horseless heroine of the "wrong" sex who fights repressive emanations of power that, once again, are not playing fairly – hitting peaceful demonstrators and setting horses against them – in defense of a war (the Vietnam war) which had no ludic features to ennoble it. Ruth continues to tell the story while baking a quasi-patriotic apple plum pie, considering:

He ordered them, Ruth said. She set one of her birthday cakes, which was an apple plum pie, on the table. I saw him. He was the responsible person. I saw the whole damn operation. I'd begun to run – the horses – but I turned because I was the one supposed to be in front and I saw him give the order. I've never honestly been so angry. (343)

Anger is here, once more, seen as the compelling inner push sparking the reaction that eventually reverses the power dynamics between Paley's heroines and their opponents; it redefines conflict in a ludic sense and thus opens revolutionary horizons of possibility. For Paley's heroines anger operates as a powerful positive drive, first of all because it allows the acknowledgment of an antagonist as such, exposing the latter's repressive intentions and attempts to flaunt the rules of the agonal conflict; secondly, because it prompts those who are experiencing this unfairness to join and take action – "Let us go forth with fear and courage and rage to save the world" (344) says Ann, a fifty-year-old woman full of aches and pains, hoisting herself up onto a chair. Their fear is a fear of the wars and pollution threatening the beauty of this world; their courage is the courage to stand up to antagonists who have all the odds in their favor, mostly because they were born winners and have always rigged the rules of the game in order to continue to be winners; their rage empowers them to make the only reasonable choice they have left – quit the game and create a better one. In his work, Huizinga explains that while the rules of each game are mandatory and unquestionable, no individual can be asked to play by rules that have not been agreed on and established along with the other players. Foucault teaches us to perceive the ways in which some rules pre-exist and void the agency of individual players: he illustrates how, through coercion and control of the bodies, disciplinary institutions make it physically impossible for subjects (in this case, players) to act other than in completely predictable, politically inscribed ways. Consequently, how can one possibly accept rules he/she has not participated in setting, and how can we interpret the conduct of those who have consciously decided to transgress them?

Once again, Huizinga's words are crucial:

Indeed, as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over. ... The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a "spoil-sport". ... By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others, he robs play of its illusion – a pregnant word which means literally 'in-play' (from *inclusio*, *illudere* or *includere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. (11)

The spoilsport therefore comes to have an enormous power: that of invalidating the game, by openly revealing its inherent, original partiality. From this perspective, the potential players we have met in both short stories discussed so far, and those that can be found throughout Paley's work, can be referred to as spoilsports, much as the author herself can be considered one, as an activist, a poet, and a woman writer telling stories of (extraordinary) ordinary women, mothers, workers, and dreamers who refuse to conform to the unfair rules of an unjust social game. Spoilsports are socially marginalized because with their mere existence they compromise society's inalterability, questioning the basic notion that the *status quo* cannot be changed and should therefore be left unaltered and functionally capable of reproducing its repressive power dynamics. However, the most destabilizing intervention a spoilsport can produce is the one that Ruthy and her friends dare to make – that is, creating a spoilsports' network with subversive purposes:

It sometimes happens, however, that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society, indeed heretics of all kinds are of a highly associative if not sociable disposition, and a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings. (12)

A small number of protesters who can easily be stigmatized and marginalized do not distress the power system's agents – they are a calculated risk, as Foucault points out in *The Will to Knowledge*: power is so pervasive that resistance is embedded in the power mechanism itself and, to a certain extent, power sustains resistance, fostering its reproduction. But the same number of protesters gathering together, with the strength and resolution of a community determined to undertake a true *agonal* conflict is a serious threat for a power apparatus which seeks nothing but blind and self-referential reproduction “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (*The Will to Knowledge* 101). In this sense, Paley's heroines and Paley herself (considering her lifelong dedication to political activism) seem to take inspiration from Henry David

Thoreau⁸, an *ante litteram* spoilsport: they intend to live according to their own sense of justice and respond to their own conscience, since the only ethically legitimate action in the face of an oppressive government is to transgress unjust laws and act like a proper outsider. Paley's "disobedient" heroines seem intent on founding a community of (fair) players willing to engage in an agonal conflict against their societies and possibly to establish a new, more ethical set of rules in tune with a ludic conception of life. They would thus change not only the games they play and their roles in these games, but the notion of community itself, laying its foundation on the play drive and ludic values.

This pattern seems to be evident in Paley's "Faith in a Tree," one of the most famous stories of the "Faith's story" cycle, published in 1974 in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. It is remarkable how the collection's title may effectively sum up the whole short story: set in a park playground, where Faith Darwin and her "co-workers in the mother trade" take their children to play, the story follows the protagonist's panoptical gaze from above as it describes a Saturday in the park seen from the branch of a sycamore, in a witty and ironic interior monologue that interweaves with the other characters' dialogues. Nothing particularly dramatic happens in the short story, until its very end: mostly, the reader learns about Faith's relationship with her children, whom she never frustrates in their creativity, even when she is the target of their cutting remarks (which sometimes sound like proper iambic invectives, the first literary expression of agonal conflict), because she recognizes these as signs of intellectual complexity and curiosity. In particular, Faith addresses her firstborn respecting his individuality and by talking to him openly and frankly about the world,⁹ because she wants to provide him with the tools to interpret and enjoy life as a creative experience, through which he might freely find his way, far from his teacher's and the other mothers' normalizing gazes.

It is also thanks to this ludic approach to motherhood that the short story ends with a surprising final twist brought about by an angry, unknowingly disobedient Richard. Toward the end of the story, a short parade of about ten people (including toddlers and three-year-olds) appears on the scene, banging pots and pans. The little group is protesting against the Vietnam war, carrying two posters: one shows a question – "Would you

burn a child?" – , with a wealthy man putting a cigarette out on a child's arm, and the words "WHEN NECESSARY," the other shows a napalmed Vietnamese baby. The demonstrators are dispersed by the neighborhood cop, who solemnly and arrogantly displays his authority while lecturing Tonto and the other children about the danger those "traitors" represent for their country and themselves. This is followed by Richard's unexpectedly furious reaction, addressed at his mother and the whole adult company:

"I hate you. I hate your stupid friends. Why didn't they just stand up to that stupid cop and say fuck you. They should of just stood up and hit him." He ripped his skates off, twisting his bad ankle. "Gimme that chalk box, Lisa, just give it to me."

In a fury of tears and disgust, he wrote in the near blacktop in pink flamingo chalk – in letters fifteen feet high, so the entire Saturday walking world could see – WOULD YOU BURN A CHILD? And under it, a little taller, the red reply, WHEN NECESSARY. (198)

To Richard, it is absolutely inconceivable that a peaceful and peace-demanding demonstration like the one he has just witnessed could be censored in such an arbitrary, repressively normalizing way; the adults in the park, in their turn, are clearly inadequate to represent any ludic impulse or civil right. Also, Richard perceives the policeman's censorship as completely unacceptable because, for a boy like him (earlier in the story, a friend of Faith's disappointedly remarks "Nobody fresher than Richard"), freedom of speech is sacred and the urge to express oneself simply insuppressible; as Accardo points out, in Grace Paley "The determination to listen, the urge to talk and the wish to be listened to meet and clash constantly. Thus, listening becomes a biased, confrontational and competitive act"¹⁰ (*L'arte di ascoltare* 39). That is why he comes up with an immediate, genuine response: not only must that peaceful message not be censored, but it must be seen by the entire "Saturday walking world." Thus, he finds another way to voice the protest and virtually join the paraders. Unpredictably, through the power of his pink flamingo claim, he infects Faith, making a new spoilsport out of this unfortunate incident:

And I think that was exactly when events turned me around, changing my

hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling. Then I met women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by my children's heartfelt brains, I thought more and more everyday about the world. (198)

Grace Paley wrote two versions of this story: the first one, dated 1967, ends before the little parade; the final episode in the story was only added in the 1974 version, completely changing its message and its relevance within the author's fictional production. In her essay "Performing Invisibility: Dialogue as Activism in Grace Paley's Texts," Darcy L. Brandel examines the ways in which Paley's use of narrative strategies politicizes her work: Brandel maintains that by making her texts difficult through textual experimentation, Paley creates a space of reflection, in which the reader can acknowledge his/her own previously invisible assumptions and prejudices. She states, "Paley's is a performative politics, as readers are made to experience a vulnerability that might affect their perspective of the more overtly political content introduced in a story: the cruelty and violence of war and the importance of actively demonstrating against it" (84). The reader is completely disarmed by the sudden twist in a short story that seemed to be about gender roles and motherhood, and he/she experiences Richard's sense of rejection first hand, bonding with his fury and eye-catching protest; thus, "Faith in a Tree" becomes the story of a genuine awakening into political consciousness, which happens somewhat unexpectedly, and therefore is all the more memorable and resonant. It could also be argued that this particular story sums up the author's political legacy – a legacy of activism and community-shared values – and that even its creation relies on a ludic drive. In fact, Paley stated on several occasions that her stories were very frequently generated by the tension between two separate stories, which resolved their contrast by creating a brand new one. Thus, if the first part in "Faith in a Tree" seems to be mainly about gender roles and motherhood, and the second one seems to portray Richard's political standpoint against repressive authorities, Faith's final words in the short story seem to concentrate upon the political awakening of a woman who gets to experience this awakening *through* motherhood. The change is

overwhelming and total, and it revolutionizes all exterior aspects of Faith's life. Yet, it somehow also reconciles the uneasiness of being a disadvantaged single mother who is systematically denied opportunities to improve her social position, with the yearning for a country where resources may be allocated to create well-being for people like Faith and her children, rather than for illegitimate wars. Faith's allusion to the change in her "style of living and telling" seems to operate on different levels: while referring to Faith within the story, it also applies to Paley, who spent her whole life thinking "more and more everyday about the world." It ultimately also appeals to the readers, who seem to be urged by the author (through Faith) to the same political awakening: to attribute a true agonal significance to their activism and to join other spoilsport companions aiming at the same goals.

In Paley's world, each day brings a new struggle. Some of them are fierce, like advocating one's own achievements as a mother, to the extent of throwing glass ashtrays when necessary; some of them are unequal and ideological, like facing a police charge while demonstrating for the end of a war; some of them are revolutionary, like revolting against unjustified censorship through a pink flamingo message. All of Paley's struggles have a common denominator, though, namely the refusal to be invisible and powerless, and every single one is, for her, a story worth telling. Paley chooses to narrate these stories in her genuine and friendly voice, which is "soft-speaking" but nonetheless "anarchic" and is born of the urge to release a healthy, creative anger. Far from being purely destructive, the anger of Paley's heroines claims its creative, *ludic* nature and performs the minor miracle of intertwining with ludic practice; and although this unique blend of anger and play frequently unfolds in seemingly trivial events, it succeeds in making the grand gesture of restoring cultural value to conflict itself, making the harshest games worth playing even by the most formerly disadvantaged, now enthusiastic spoilsports.

Notes

¹ In the foreword to his book, Huizinga explains his deliberate use of the preposition “of” rather than “in,” since his intent is not to define the play-element in the manifestation of culture, but rather to “integrate the concept of play into that of culture” (5). Still, his translator motivates his choice of the preposition “in” due to euphonic reasons.

² Faith is a recurrent character in Paley’s short stories: critics, in fact, often refer to “Faith’s stories” as a cycle within the author’s *corpus*. She is also referred to as a sort of author’s literary *persona*, since through her eyes we see some of the most significant plot developments in Paley’s work.

³ “The two ideas often seem to blend absolutely in the archaic mind. Indeed, all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation. We can call it the most intense, the most energetic form of play and at the same time the most palpable and primitive” (Huizinga 89).

⁴ My translation.

⁵ My translation.

⁶ “You always start hollering if I don’t do what you tell me” (Paley, 338).

⁷ “Yeah, but if you love your country you have to go fight for it. How come you don’t want to? Even if you get killed, it’s worth it” (Paley 338).

⁸ See Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*.

⁹ “I could tell him scientific things like that, because I considered him absolutely brilliant. See how beautiful the ice is on the river, see the stony palisades, I said, I hugged him, my pussycat, I said, see the interesting world” (Paley 184).

¹⁰ My translation.

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