

A Gasstronomical Idea Brought to Life: The Wife as a Person in *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*

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Abstract

With all of the contemporary feminist scholarship on identity, narration, and personhood, a much forgotten aspect of literature has been ignored: the postmodern era in American fiction. The metafictional aspect of fragmented, nonlinear, and dystopian postmodern works is as important today as it was in the first mid-century wave of feminism. The way men and women view women's roles and bodies play a significant role in how we interpret literature and culture. This paper addresses whether the main character in William Gass' novella Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife (1968) is strictly a linguistic construct, or a female with personhood. I look at several different postmodern critical theorists to illustrate how the story's main persona, Babs, defies stereotypes of female roles, femininity, societal standards, decorum, and mainstream, traditional literary prose. Not only is Babs more than a linguistic construct, she is a character who helps us understand the way in which we view womanhood in a patriarchal society.

From the naked torso of a woman on the cover of a book to the naked posterior on the back, William H. Gass presents to us the body of *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968). The nude woman begins to eat her words on the opening page of the novella, with a block of *S* propped between her dainty fingers. At the same time, she could be pulling the words right out of her mouth and setting them on the page for us to read. Is the woman a real person? Is she a character? She opens her mouth as the readers open their minds to determine what it is their eyes behold. Could these be mere words printed on paper? Has Gass created a linguistic construct, not a character? Just as one perceives the woman's actions on the opening page, one perceives the idea of the wife as either a person or a linguistic construct. Some argue that

she is one or neither. Why might critics disagree that she is a character? The wife in *WMLW* makes up the body of the book, both literally and metaphorically. To be sure, one can view the wife as *both* a person and as a linguistic construct. Gass provides evidence of her physicality, her emotionality, and her mentality. She may also be perceived as a linguistic construct when one examines her in such a context. Just as we see a person in each photograph throughout the book, we see a person within the printed words on each page. We come face to face with a character interacting with fiction.

Before we can understand the character and idea of fiction in *WMLW*, it is necessary to gain a sense of who the writer is and how his opinions and philosophies contribute to his work. William Gass writes within the postmodern genre, though he “particularly resents being called postmodern” (Holloway 75). However, one cannot evade the fact that he fits this description, especially as a metafictional writer, and proves the opposite, as *WMLW* “is clearly one exaggerated attempt on his part to do something flagrantly antirealist and unconventional” (75). On that same note, John Carlos Rowe addresses the idea of postmodernity and reality in a reference to a Ronald Sukenick book. He writes that realism, “implies . . . the traditional concerns of the novel to represent social reality, the complex relationship between psychological and social experience, and . . . our lived realities” (18). It is possible to think that *WMLW* is a representation of the postmodern world, or even—simply—metafiction. Gass’s novel also reveals psychological and social aspects prevalent in our society. Though the “moderns had attempted to criticize the accepted conventions of everyday life, proper behavior, and thus the consensually established terms for reality,” Rowe argues that Gass is one of the postmodernists who “claimed to go beyond their modernist ancestors by abandoning reality altogether” (18). Though elements of reality definitely exist in *WMLW*, Gass certainly appears to abandon reality, especially in the way in which he writes nonlinearly and with schizophrenic typology. This method of writing creates a distance between the character and the reader, and illustrates how both function in the novella.

Usually in works of fiction, the characters live in a cause and effect world, developing event by event, while the reader observes and perhaps interacts by laughing or feeling some sort of an emotional outburst. Gass turns the tables of conventional reading and writing by inventing a situation in which the character sits back while the reader stands on his toes, and, as with the coffee stains on Babs’s body, “the emphasis” reminds “the reader that this is fiction” (Hix 64). It is important to remember that Babs is aware that the coffee stains are representations, “because, as you must surely realize, this book is many removes from anything I’ve set pen, hand, or cup to” (Gass 38). As the narrator speaks to the reader, she reminds us that it is not a real conversation, but a game she plays in which she wants the reader to forget that he is reading fiction. Critic H.L. Hix argues that “the book’s events” do

not happen “to the character, they happen primarily to the reader” (64). That said, Gass believes characters are best when they are memorable. Is Babs a memorable character, though? A memorable character must be a great character. What constitutes a great character? Arthur M. Saltzman declares: “For me, a character is really a voice and a source of language. If one has really created a character, then he knows that that character is going to have its language and will be speaking in a certain way” (“Interview” 125). Gass’s belief in character, voice, and language affects the way he writes and how those characters develop and are perceived by readers. In the same interview with Saltzman, Gass expands the character notion, in reference to another of his characters, “Psychological shifts, change of heart, all sorts of thing happen which are inexplicable, except that if the speech is good enough, it works” (124). Babs exemplifies these aspects of good characterization. Many shifts occur, though some consistency prevails in the tone and subject matter (sex, longing for fulfillment). These changes and facets of her psychology are definitely “inexplicable,” and as Hix ascertains, these may be “parts of a divided self” (66). The wife is divided, as actual persons in the world usually are: she has feelings of inadequacy as a woman and she recognizes men’s inadequacies, while at times, her other self sleeps, plays, and writes these inadequacies in a parodical screenplay. Many times, like many female stand-up comedians, the wife ironizes her situation by making light of flaws, joking, or reaching into philosophical realms, especially in her notion of being “imagination imagining itself imagine,” a thought she repeats throughout the novel (Gass 6). Saltzman alludes to “other obsessive, rhetorically minded characters” in Gass’s work; thus, we can imply that he attributes these qualities to Babs, among others (“Interview” 124). Even though she has attributes that traditionally go with personhood, as I have argued, several critics deny that she is a person.

Hoffman and Murphy give plenty of credit to the idea that Gass’s characters are not necessarily people, nor are they completely linguistic constructs. They assert that the author “breaks through the stereotype that ‘character’ means *person*, by suggesting that it can refer to” other things (267). Yet, Gass asserts, “Normally, characters are fictional human beings” (qtd. in Hoffman and Murphy 273). Certainly Babs is not a real person; she is essentially a conglomeration of words on pages. Hoffman and Murphy insist that “while we invariably think of characters as people, the proper names given to characters are initially the emptiest words used in a novel” (267). However, Babs also has human attributes. It is natural for readers to try and bring a character to life, perhaps to identify with a setting or to suspend disbelief, which is why Hoffman and Murphy are correct when they say that Babs Masters “means nothing without a description” (267). We see the words on the pages of *WMLW* and automatically try to find meaning in them. We try to figure out who the main character is, and we have no conception of who or what Babs might be until Gass describes her (or, until Babs

describes herself). Gass also believes that “characters, unlike ourselves, freed from existence, can shine like essence, and purely Be” (276). Although Babs may Be, she ironically is not a Being, because she is empty, both metaphorically and physically. She admits: “Empty I began and empty I remained” (Gass 52), but by the end of the novella, the preceding pages are anything but empty. Her words were not completely devoid of meaning; she could not possibly have tricked the reader into listening to her entire story to pretend it never existed, or that it could be wiped out so easily. Babs does not give herself enough credit (although, in a sense, she is right in feeling empty because of abandonment by others) because her ideas are profound and she made the reader think and imagine. If she is empty, it is only because we, the readers, have drained her mind of all her thoughts. Still, it is apparent why Babs can seem more like a linguistic construct than a character.

Character is one of the most important aspects of fiction and fiction writing. Fully developed characters add dimension to a story, making it more accessible to readers in terms of enjoyment and understanding. I argue that Babs is well developed because of the details of her mind and also her body—how it looks, feels, and functions. Gass brings Babs to life with language, metaphor, graphic text, and photographs of a real human being. I believe Babs personifies the pictures, that the pictures do not personify Babs. As much as the reader must invest in hearing and seeing Babs, much less understand her, one must surely acknowledge Gass’s genius character development. However, Larry McCaffery disputes this idea when he states, “the narrative has no...fully developed characters” (*Muse* 172). Perhaps McCaffery and others who agree with him feel Babs is incomplete because the book does not follow an Aristotelian plotline in addition to fully developing a character. I disagree and maintain that Babs is quite well developed, both graphically and linguistically. Before we explore how Babs interacts with other men, and thus, proves to have unequivocal relationships, we must first look at Babs’s selfishness, which may be a determining factor in this inequity.

Babs is not just an imagined being, but also a character that is vain and very self-aware. Arthur M. Saltzman states, “Babs Masters is the imagination after it has been allowed the pleasures of narcissism” (*The Fiction* 105). She is her persona, unfalteringly, a selfish, vain woman, who believes she has every right to be that way. Thus, she has needs that are “blatant and insatiable; she demands our undivided attention,” and we give it to her; we are consumed until the very last page by Babs Masters (106). Not only do we “give it to her” by means of attention, but, we give her just what she wants—the sex she craves. Undoubtedly, we exploit her. She seems somewhat of a hedonist: she has as much fun as possible, but turns into a masochist, as we see she gets hurt every time by every man who neglects her needs. In this consumption, we realize that “Babs [is] extremely vain about her physical qualities and resentful when she is used but is not noticed” (McCaffery, *Muse* 177). Babs consumes us

while we consume her, as she gives her body so freely, and thus, transforms into a real being. To be sure, “Gass has exploited the physics of the book to flesh out fiction, to make the book a body” (Caramello 100). As we see more of Babs’s body, we also see how she longs for what she never receives. As she displays herself, “Gass, thus, invites one to enter his work of art—a woman made of words and paper—with the same sort of excitement, participation, and creative energy as one would enter a woman’s body in sexual intercourse” (McCaffery, “Art” 25). As McCaffery pays more attention to the book and Babs, he finds, “Unfortunately, as we discover from Babs, all too frequently those who enter her do so without enthusiasm, often seemingly unaware that she is there at all” (25). Here, we see the inequality in Babs’s relationships. Not only do her lovers mistreat her, but also Babs’s readers are culprits of the same wrongdoing. Just as her lovers decide to use Babs for their own pleasure, “The readers decide how they wish to experience the book, how they wish to make love to . . . Babs” as well (Wolfshohl 501). Certainly, as humans, we crave attention and care and we also require of our friends and lovers the same type of intimacy as does Babs. Clearly, though, not everyone gets what he or she yearns for, as is obvious in *WMLW*. Babs does humble herself and recognize her longing and pain, but she really is “a woman . . . obsessed with sexual penetration and claims to want to remain open with it” (Caramello 99). It is not so much that Babs is deceived and manipulated, rather, she is the manipulator, as she shows more and more skin, offers sexual favors, and seduces the reader into keeping her open. Babs “requires of her readers [and her lovers] a careful inspection of her storied skin” (Kaufmann 27). Charles Caramello sums this idea up impeccably: “On the one hand, we have a voyeur’s art; on the other hand, we have an appeal for book and reader to couple and come together” (99).

After having identified and expanded upon Gass’s ideas, character development, and Babs’s vanity, I continue my analysis of Babs as a character, or person. She is not only a linguistic construct, but also a character with which one can identify oneself. Willie Masters’ wife is a person who does and says things that real people do. She faces the same situations as real people do. She encounters a circumstance and faces the reality of the consequences of her behavior and decisions. She is not only a person, but she plays a person, as an actress in a series of fragmented and intertwined plays. As an actress, she plays Babs, Olga, Willie Masters’ wife, a whore, and a theoretician. The wife is also a dramatist who vocalizes and performs in her own play. Her life appears to be absurdly free because she plays with her words as much as she plays with men. This lifestyle is somewhat deceiving, though, in that the wife’s life is so mundane she feels the need to liberate herself by exaggerating her flaws. She acts each scene of her life out on a stage that casts a blinding light of awareness upon her audience. She is the director and producer of her own play and of her own play on words. She

opens up her body and in so doing, opens up her language; paradoxically, she opens up to her audience by opening up her language.

Language and openness play large roles in *WMLW*, which factor in to the importance of the reader's perception of the wife's voice. Although a male writes her story, it sounds as though the wife's voice is female because of her direct tone and the intimacy with which she reveals her character to us. Incidentally, critics have noticed that this is not the case, and that her voice is evidently very resonating of a male's (Gass's). Rowe brings up the idea of postmodern writers having been "primarily white men, but...profoundly patriarchal" (38). Although I hear a female voice, it is possible, even probable, that a patriarchal male speaks for her at times and influences her behavior. Rowe continues by arguing that the novella "is a startling example" of said masculine influence, "which metaphorizes the narrative . . . inviting the reader to 'play' with [the wife's] body" (38). Babs does want the reader and her lovers to explore her and enjoy her—even love her. She serves as a "feminine" character that is an "alter ego[]" for the masculine imaginary" (38). In addition to Rowe's ideas, Caramello argues the same, that Gass "makes the woman speak his voice, the voice of the male" (105). At this point, the male voice is apparently quite convincing, at least to male critics. I still hold that Babs has an equally female voice and feminine side, but do not feel it necessary to make an either-or decision. Just as she may be seen as both character and linguistic construct, he can have both a male and female voice. Perhaps this is why Caramello adds to this point, "what disturbs in this book is . . . its hegemony of the female voice towards ends not all together pleasant . . . it lags ideologically" (105). Patriarchs and chauvinists may agree with the lack of ideology in Babs's nature. Feminists and liberals may disagree that there is a problem and argue that Babs explores her sexual freedom and identity and refuses to conform to antiquated attitudes about sex. As surprising as her words may be, the wife still tells an interesting and believable story.

Keeping in mind where the wife's voice comes from, we can hear her voice more clearly as we see her come to life. Her voice is consistent throughout the story, even when she admits her flaws. She has taken into account the way her body looks in comparison to others. The wife provides details of her physical assets, including her chest, hips, and hair (hairiness). She is not ashamed of her curvaceous figure. In fact, she is strikingly self-aware of her assets and imperfections alike. We do at times, however, see a bit of self-consciousness peeking through her language—for instance when her father called her a "plump little lady" (Gass 3), but she still possesses an air of confidence. She makes fun of the "flat blond" (10) and how the woman was an "udder disappointment" (9) to the man in suspenders. She also refers to the blond as a "twiggy little wonder" (10) and makes fun of her fake breasts popping. The wife finds humor in any situation, especially when she parodies the wonders of

the female figure. She even goes as far as naming her body parts—playing on how men might name their cars, baseball caps, and penises. In her commentary, she decides to call one of her eyes “Clara,” ponders the names she would give her heart, her vagina, and even her toes: “Timothy, Terrence, Titus, Tom” (12). The wife exudes a quirky confidence in her satire of the human condition. Not only does she find humor in her body, but she also finds humor in the contemplation of her emotions.

The wife’s emotional side is somewhat difficult to understand. She is an emotionally strong woman; she amuses herself (and us) with an open and honest deliberation of the grotesque. She makes fun of all sorts of men and at times, she still feels vulnerable—as would any person. She writes the story, in fact, for the exact purpose of displaying her emotions and vulnerabilities. As a person, she is well aware of her imperfections. If she were perfect, or could not see imperfections, then she would not be a real person. However, she does compare herself to a fictional character, when she says, “I dream like Madame Bovary” (6). Initially, we see the wife making a point about how dissatisfying her life is by making a loaded reference to a distressed, suicidal woman. However, she does not miss a step and turns her frustrations into a joke by saying she never dies in the stories, she just rewrites the endings for the men, who “fall asleep on [her] and shrivel up” (6). Her sardonic attitude is uplifting as she closes and shelves the books on men and delves further into her unsatisfactory sexual life.

The wife dramatizes emotion in her screenplay about Ivan and Olga, whose married life superficially looks like a normal couple at the breakfast table. The wife sets the stage for dramatization in a purely artistic manner, beginning with back-story, stage directions, the use of props, manipulating and including the audience, all succeeded by an outrageous series of footnotes. This screenplay is an important part of the whole story because the wife plays the part of Olga, “a bitch” whose emotions factor into the equation in that “the woman is always the heavy” (14). After setting up the scene, Babs begins the discourse between Ivan and Olga. Ivan tries to eat his roll while Olga reads the newspaper. The bun is a metaphor for their relationship. This interplay of characters also represents the metaphor for the wife’s relationship with men. The scene begins with Ivan cutting into his roll and dropping it. When he picks it back up, he says, “There’s a foreign something in his bread, no doubt about it, an alien substance—what?” (14). This demonstrates that he sees a flaw in what he has. He tries what he can to make something of the bun, but drops it and fumbles with his bald spot instead. His sighing and grinning and shrugging signify how a person might act when faced with a difficult situation. He grapples with the bun even more, “pinches” (15) until he has “something” (15), which turns out to be “a sort of unmistakable general idea” (15). Clearly, the man tries as hard as he can to solve a problem, or conceive of what the problem is, and

after all his effort, it is something basic and broadly categorized. Finally, he finds what he is looking for, and it ends up being “Recognition” (16). Saltzman clarifies this as “the inherent deceptiveness of the physical object that lies before him” (*The Fiction* 109). As deceptive as this object may be, the story does not quite end there.

When he recognizes that he has a problem, Ivan drops the bun and begins to ask Olga a question, which ends up being a series of hems and haws before he finally sputters out what he was going to say, something simple. During his attempts at gaining her attention (even by calling her the wrong name), Olga pulls up her bathrobe and shows more and more skin—more of her body, of herself—until he finally notices her gestures. Ivan’s passiveness exacerbates Olga’s aggravation until she retorts, “Wha-a-at!” (Gass 17). This situation parallels to the wife’s sexual (and intellectual) dissatisfaction at home and how she looks elsewhere for satiation, only to be sorely disappointed by other men. The wife uses the screenplay as a form of stepping outside of herself and looking at her life in a different perspective.

The couples’ interaction weighs heavily on the wife’s view of herself, her husband, and her lovers. The coffee rings on her and the pages give “further evidence of the insensibility of past suitors” (Saltzman, *The Fiction* 109). Saltzman also argues that “Willie Masters’ wife is longing for careful use, for someone capable of truly possessing her” (109). Thus, she sees the bun as a metaphor for the human body and her relationships. The bun is a sticky, digestible, discardable mess. The wife sees her relationships (and bodies, or bodily fluids) as just that—soluble and one in which neither party equally reciprocates the effort to keep alive. The wife also projects her ideas of what a relationship should be in accordance to gender roles. McCaffery insists on the power of roles and the way couples should act, when he declares, “parallels exist—or should exist—between a woman and her lover” (*Muse* 172). He also recognizes that this idea of parallelism in a relationship is “the central metaphor of the whole work” (172). If, by parallels, McCaffery means “equivocal responsibilities,” then “should” is the operative word in his statement. Relationships *should* have some equality, but unfortunately, Babs’ relationships do not possess that quality. Historically, a woman puts forth the majority of the effort in a relationship. She is usually verbal, she displays feelings openly, finds solutions to problems, does chores, takes care of her husband, among other role assignments. Olga and Ivan’s story dismantles this convention of romance/marriage and provides a feminist reading—one that empowers the woman as a sexually liberated being, thus infantilizing the man. In this story, the woman is self-aware and knowingly, indiscreetly, turns the tables of gender roles in an attempt to fulfill her own desires. With every choice the wife makes (with words, body language, and so forth), she does so carefully and is aware of the effects each decision has on her lovers.

When Willie Masters' lonesome wife is not playing herself, she is playing Babs, Olga, a whore, and a philosopher. She embraces her own roles and reinvents the mentality of the postmodern and feminist era. As a person, she values her mind just as much as she values her body and her emotions. The story of Willie Masters' wife unfolds as the speaker—the wife—writes disjunctive, sub-stories that relate to each other and her life as a person. The wife is a real person because she embodies the different aspects of what it means to be human, including the physical, emotional, and mental. In *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, Gass gives voice to the wife, who unfolds the metaphor of dissatisfaction in a complex story of what it is like to be a successfully developed character and person, not just a linguistic construct.

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