

## ***You Got to Tell: Private Spaces and Public Narrators in Grace Paley's Stories***

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The American storyteller Grace Paley (December 11, 1922-August 22, 2007) has been known for her political activism and her ability to construct powerful voices which recollected female, migrant, and urban collective experiences in post-WORLD WAR II America. In her stories, Paley emphasizes the act of storytelling as a tool for creating a collective shared experience out of individual characters, making the personal and domestic collective and political. In this paper, I will analyze the role of Paley's most prominent narrator, Faith Darwin, bridging the gap between the private and public urban spheres in three different and evolutive stories: "A Conversation with My Father" (1972), "The Long-Distance Runner" and "Faith in a Tree" (1974). These stories exemplify how Faith uses different strategies in storytelling with the purpose of achieving personal identity and empowerment through communal identification and the recollection of familiar experiences

*Keywords:* Grace Paley; storytelling; *flâneuse*; social commitment; female voice.

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### ***You Got to Tell*: espacios privados y narradoras públicas en las historias de Grace Paley**

La narradora estadounidense Grace Paley (11 de diciembre de 1922–22 de agosto de 2007) es conocida por su activismo político y su capacidad para construir voces poderosas que recogen las experiencias colectivas femeninas, migrantes y urbanas en los Estados Unidos posteriores a la Segunda Guerra Mundial. En sus relatos, Paley hace hincapié en el acto de contar historias como herramienta para crear una experiencia colectiva compartida a partir de personajes individuales, haciendo de lo personal y doméstico algo colectivo y político. En este artículo, se analizará el papel de la narradora más destacada de Paley, Faith Darwin, estudiando cómo relaciona las esferas urbanas privada y pública en tres historias diferentes y evolutivas: “A Conversation with My Father” (1972), “The Long Distance Runner” y “Faith in a Tree” (1974). Estos relatos ejemplifican cómo Faith utiliza diferentes estrategias en la narración, con el propósito de lograr la identidad personal y el empoderamiento a través de la identificación comunitaria y el recuerdo de experiencias familiares.

*Palabras clave:* Grace Paley; narración; *flâneuse*; compromiso social; voz femenina.

### ***You Got to Tell*: espaços privados e narradoras públicas nas histórias de Grace Paley**

A narradora americana Grace Paley (11 de dezembro de 1922–22 de agosto de 2007) é conhecida por seu ativismo político e sua capacidade de construir vozes poderosas que capturam as experiências coletivas femininas, migrantes e urbanas na América pós da Segunda Guerra Mundial. Nas suas histórias, Paley enfatiza o ato de contar histórias como um instrumento para criar uma experiência coletiva compartilhada a partir de personagens individuais, tornando o pessoal e doméstico em coletivo e político. Neste artigo, vou analisar o papel da narradora mais proeminente de Paley, Faith Darwin, estabelecendo laços entre a esfera urbana privada e pública em três histórias diferentes e evolutivas: “A Conversation with My Father” (1972), “The Long-Distance Runner” e “Faith in a Tree” (1974). Estas histórias exemplificam como a Faith utiliza diferentes estratégias na narrativa com o objetivo de alcançar a identidade pessoal e o empoderamento através da identificação comunitária e da recordação de experiências familiares.

*Palavras-chave:* Grace Paley; narração; *flâneuse*; compromisso social; voz feminina.

GRACE PALEY, AS A TIRELESS storyteller, has always shown her interest in the art of narrating itself and what it entails. Her short stories reflect a changing world for women and capture their experiences in urban post-WORLD WAR II America; contrasting several voices that create collective and heterogeneous knowledge. As such, many of her stories have titles related, in one way or another, to the narrative process: “The Loudest Voice” (1959), “Listening” (1985), “The Story Hearer” (1985) or “A Conversation with My Father” (1972). Paley changed from poetry to short stories in the mid-1950s, as she felt the need to report what was happening at that time, a need that was also felt by her narrators. She had the responsibility to transmit her knowledge and in doing so, she deviated from the masculine path she had followed in her way of thinking up until then. She started dealing with topics linked to femininity as the realm of the house or oral tradition: “As a grown-up woman, I had no choice. Everyday life, kitchen life, children life had been handed to me” (Paley xiv). Paley started writing short stories at a time when women were being deflected away from the public sphere and the labor market, and back into the private realm of domesticity. She kept writing throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when second-wave feminist movements were on the rise, all of which is reflected in her characters through an evolution of their awareness.

However, Paley defies preconceptions and translates the complexities of the female experience through all her female characters and especially through her narrators. Faith Darwin, her most popular narrator and character, represents a modern, urban woman. But she is not the only one depicted, as she interacts with many other women, creating a communal experience: “so that the ‘we’ is produced from a series of collaborating ‘I’s” (Lanser 256). Some of the voices that construct the collective experience sometimes clash with Faith’s, helping her to broaden both her narration and her collective consciousness.

Many scholars (Accardo; Lévy; Mandel, etc.) suggest that Darwin was Paley’s alter ego, representing everything that the writer stood for. If not her alter ego, what can certainly be argued is that Darwin operates as an emblem of Paley’s trademark optimism in a time when shiny appearances hid bleak realities. The aim of this paper is to analyze Faith’s role as a narrator, looking into her strategies to connect the private and public spheres in women’s lives. To do so, I will examine what storytelling represents for Faith and how it allows

her to enrich the female, collective experience as well as her own, opening a path towards self-awareness. Through scholarly texts on the notion of *flâneuse*, I will prove how Faith, in her role of observer of the city, can qualify as one, vindicating the female gaze. Then, I will examine the strategy of constantly transitioning between micro and macro-political scenarios, trying to connect them. As Paley scholars like Judie Newman illustrate, this expands Faith's social awareness and constructs a female, urban, and collective experience. Lastly, I will elucidate how Faith uses storytelling as a way of self-discovery and, in vindicating her own voice, she vindicates all women. This type of breaking away from male traditions in writing can qualify as what French feminist writer Hélène Cixous —a decisive figure for poststructuralist feminist theory— called *écriture féminine* in 1975: writing about women, for women, and as women.

Paley represents the city in a realistic light but always leaves room for hope and optimism, unlike other male writers of her generation as paradigmatic pessimist Philip Roth, altering the typical notions of the decadent *flâneur* and reclaiming her voice as a modern *flâneuse*. The term, popularized by Baudelaire and originally employed for strolling and observant men in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, evolved during Modernism towards a figure that explained both the urban experience and the class tensions derived from it. Faith wanders through the city knitting a web of interrelations that allows her to create a collective experience and to discover herself, resembling the definition of the *flanêuse* by Lauren Elkin:

She may be a wife or a mother, or she may be totally free [...]. I found her using cities as performance spaces, or as hiding places [...]; as places to liberate herself from oppression or to help those who are oppressed; as places to declare her independence; as places to change the world or be changed by it. (22)

In “The Long-Distance Runner”, Faith, as a kind of middle-aged, female, urban resident decides to become a long-distance runner. Running functions as a way of overcoming her lassitude and a way of re-examining the city. *Flanêurs* used to observe and evaluate but Faith decided to run:

I wanted to stop and think admiringly about New York City. There aren't many rotting cities so tan and sandy and speckled with citizens at their

salty edges. But I had already spent a lot of life lying down or standing and staring. I had decided to run. (Paley 249)

The decision to run provides Faith with a new status away from the ennui of domesticity and away from the male voice that stands and appraises beauty; Faith's *flânerie* will be a different form of observation. Faith acknowledges the decadence of New York, but the depiction is also made in a hopeful tone, focusing on the beauty of diversity. When Faith is running in "The Long-Distance Runner", she is performing several tasks: she is reporting the state of the city, learning about its social evolution, and learning about herself.

In "Faith in a Tree", Faith is again in a different position, diverging from traditional storytellers and traditional narratives: the short story is a mixture of metafiction, social realism, daydreaming, and a comic vignette. This time, Faith is "sitting on the twelve-foot-high, strong, long arm of a sycamore" (Paley 179). Standing high above the rest provides Faith with some perspective and a wide visual range that encompasses all the characters and their complexities. Faith is here in a static position but the divergence from traditional narratives and typical *flanêurs* is made in a different way. Instead of taking advantage of her God-like position, Faith uses humor and self-deprecation in all her remarks, even defining herself as "the creation of His soft second thought" (179). In addition, all the characters are constantly interrupting her and challenging her narratorial authority. Faith also describes the city in a combination of warmth and realistic tones: "He sees South into Brooklyn how Prospect Park lies in its sand-rooted trees among Japanese gardens and police" (179). In the depiction of the city, Faith does acknowledge her higher position as a narrator, but shortly after she acknowledges her limitations, both as a narrator and as an observer: "I can only see Kitty [...]. Although I can't really see them" (180). She is no God and cannot see everything, as a narrator she stands above her community and remains its connoisseur, but even she cannot save herself from the limitations of narrating and observing.

"A Conversation with My Father" differs slightly from the *flânerie* of the other two selected stories, for in this one Faith acquires the role both of a metafictional *flâneuse* and a narrator, as she conceives a story as if she were both an outside observer and the main protagonist of the scene, crafting two levels of the narrative. In addition, the portrayal of the city is done through

the portrayal and the evolution of the woman in Faith's story. This strategy of inserting a story within the main story is very common in Paley and allows her narrators a link to their communities. As Victoria Aarons remarks: "The formation of a working, contingent self, then, for Paley, depends largely upon identifying with a community in which individuals feel an abiding and perhaps consanguineous affinity" (21). Faith's father asks her to write a simple story and so tries Faith, who has witnessed the hardships endured by women in the city and decides to base her story on her knowledge. Indeed, Faith, as a narrator, in all the stories, understands storytelling as a kind of ethical commitment to the rest of the world and the rest of her community. This ethical commitment is, nevertheless, conjugated with a need to use the city as a place for self-discovery and storytelling as a mean of self-realization.

The political side of the stories constitutes, as I have mentioned before, a diversion from the typical *flâneur*, whose main traits were his individuality and the observation of the decadent city. Instead, Faith observes the city not as a dabbling bourgeois but as a committed middle-class woman who feels the need to depict her community to keep it alive, bustling, and self-aware. To do so, Faith plays in all her stories with micro and macro-political scenarios, bridging and mixing both, so as to build a collective and heterogenous female experience. She visits, in "The Long-Distance Runner", her old neighbourhood during her running, now impoverished and prominently African American, and stays in her old house with the new tenant, Mrs. Luddy, and her family. The social, private, and political scenario of a white, middle-class woman living in her old house with a black, working-class woman results in demonstrating the limitations of liberal white feminism for subaltern communities. Faith's stupefaction of the destitute conditions of the house and the neighbourhood clashes with Mrs. Luddy's resigned acceptance:

At night, I knew animals roamed the place, squalling and howling, furious New York dogs and street cats and mighty rats. You would think you were in Bear Mountain Park, the terror of venturing forth. "Someone ought to clean that up". I said. Mrs. Luddy said, "Who you got in mind? Mrs. Kennedy?" (Paley 258)

Mrs. Luddy has no time for white liberal myths and their supposed miracles. Living in a forsaken neighbourhood, she endures life with pragmatism and resignation. Both women accurate their experiences with men when Mrs.

Luddy makes an interesting remark: “The first, men, but they turned rotten, white women had ruined the best, give them the idea their dicks were made of solid gold” (259). Mrs. Luddy alludes to white women contributing to racialized stereotypes and the reification of black male sexuality, which had a devastating effect on females too. By joining little pieces of the experience of other members of the community, Faith becomes more mindful of the social situation and enriches her own knowledge and experience, “She lives in them. She learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next” (265).

The immersion in a private, social situation that leads Faith to a broader awareness of social and political issues is a constant in many of Paley’s stories. In “Faith in a Tree”, the situation evolves in a similar way. From her tree, Faith is able to visualize a micro-political scenario of several characters interacting, leaving and entering the scene. Those characters communicate with Faith as well: her son Richard, her second son Anthony, the moral Mrs. Finn, Kitty —“a co-worker in the mother trade” (180)—, the dazzling Anna, and Philip, the attractive and neglectful father. The situation initially resembles a play, where characters interchange remarks on the nature of motherhood or class differences. At this early stage, Faith already gives glimpses of the social situation:

Since I have already mentioned singing, I have to tell you: it is not Sunday. For that reason, all the blue-eyed, boy-faced policemen in the park are worried. They can see that lots of our vitamin-enlarged highschool kids are planning to lung their guitar cases all day long. (182)

Another character appears and asks Faith about the absent father of her children, Ricardo, who has recently written to Faith to ask her for money. Faith is still on the top of the sycamore (she only descends to admire Philip, the attractive newcomer) and tries to answer him in a humorous and detached tone, but the scene gets suddenly personal. Humor and manipulations of distance are two strategies that Paley applies to Faith so as to engage the reader at the same time that Faith becomes engaged. As readers, the constant shifting between viewpoints (Faith’s inner monologue and the actual scene), makes it impossible to stick by one perspective only, becoming more politically engaged and evolving from the initial perspective whenever Faith’s changes:

In terms of narrative form, manipulations of distance are what make the story politically effective. In the tale (as Jacqueline Taylor has demonstrated in a sophisticated formal analysis) it is often quite difficult to distinguish between Faith's unspoken thoughts expressed only to the reader, and her direct utterances. [...] The scene jumps suddenly at us. We are not securely outside the story (in our tree), nor are we snugly inviolable, sharing the headspace of a narrator. (Newman 7)

As things get personal and sentimental for Faith, they do so for the reader. She reflects on motherhood and her pride for her sons, but quickly returns to humor and detachment, as she is all the time manipulating distance and exhibiting a kind of superiority in her remarks: "I am above that kindness" (Paley 187).

Suddenly, the micro-scenario is disrupted by the irruption of world politics: Vietnam. The atrocious conflict that lasted for two decades (1955-1975), for the purpose of combating communism, made the American liberal left so appalled that their activism increased substantially, with many demonstrations and statements against the war. Portraying that situation in the story, Faith narrates how a group of protesters interrupt the conversation in the park and are told off by Douglas, the local policeman. The protesters become the central topic of conversation, being chased by Douglas. Faith, dedicated to asserting her superiority to the rest, does nothing but contemplate the scene and is objurgated by Richard: "I hate you. I hate your stupid friends. Why didn't they stand up to that stupid cop and say fuck you?" (Paley 198). Disappointed and angered, Richard joins the protesters and makes Faith come to her senses. Faith, who had been fulfilling the role of the typical *flâneur*, observing decadence and asserting her individuality, realizes her mistake and her lack of commitment, too occupied dealing with banal things that meant nothing compared to the urgency of the current political situation. The micro-political scenario turns into a macro-political one, which constitutes for Faith a call for attention and a way of enriching her experience:

And I think that is 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 and everyday about the world. (Paley 182)



Richard provokes a social and political awakening in her. It is at this moment when Faith becomes aware of her ethical duty as a narrator and mutates from *flâneur* to *flâneuse*, not only observing her community but becoming an active and involved participant through her stories. As explained before, Paley abandons male topics in favor of those more neglected and traditionally attributed to women: storytelling was her entrance to political activism. Likewise, Faith carries out a mutation. While the *flâneur* was all about an invisible observant of the city, a detached figure narrating what he spotted; the *flâneuse* engages with the space she is occupying. Elkin clarifies the nuance: “She shows herself. She shows up against the city” (22). Elkin alludes to the more militant and combative character of the *flâneuse*, in contrast to the *flâneur*’s more aloof and detached spirit.

More mature, Faith triggers the mechanism of becoming an active participant in her community through her stories in “A Conversation with My Father”. Her father longs for a more masculine and traditional way of writing and begs her to write a simple story. Finally, Faith thinks of a “story that had been happening for a couple of years right across the street” (Paley 237). It is the story of a woman whose son becomes a junkie. The story was published in 1972, when hard drugs like heroin and crack had spread and blighted working and middle-class neighborhoods: “This boy at about fifteen became a junkie, which is not unusual in our neighbourhood” (Paley 238). Out of empathy and the desire to remain close to her son, the mother becomes a junkie too. For Faith, telling the story becomes a way of vindicating all women who underwent similar processes as the protagonist of her story: women who sacrificed themselves for their families but carried on, not having the luxury to fall into victimization and tragedy. From a private scenario, she uncovers two social problems: the rapid spread of drugs in New York City, motherly sacrifices, and their cost to women. However, her father is not satisfied with the story’s lack of detail. Although Faith depicts realistic events, her way of telling stories (embodying Paley’s way) is very different: her stories are humorous and pragmatic, often missing linear progressions and character descriptions; actions are what matter. Gloria Cronin affirms this difference: “Instead of rivaling the mimetic historical traditions of traditional realistic fictions, Paley prefers typically minimalist sketches, simplified cause-and-effect connections” (Cronin 148-149). Faith’s father’s insistence on knowing every detail of the story starts to tire Faith, who feels the responsibility of telling a story that happened to many women:

Oh Pa. This is a simple story about a smart woman who came to N.Y.C. full of interest love trust excitement very up-to-date, and about her son, what a hard time she had in this world. Married or not, it's of small consequence. (Paley 239)

The depiction of that story mixes communal experience with Faith's own story too. Upset, her father is longing for a dialectical closure: "Poor woman. Poor girl, to be born in a time of fools, to live among fools. The end. The End. You were right to put that down. The End" (Paley 242). However, Faith is not ready or willing to let tragedy be the end. It is in this moment when Paley's preeminent optimism comes out:

'No Pa' I begged him. 'It doesn't have to be. She's only about forty. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on. A teacher or a social worker. An ex-junkie! Sometimes is better than having a master's in education. (Paley 242)

Faith mutates once again from *flâneuse* to a full-fledged narrator, refusing to fall into the deterministic traps of historical traditions. She uses a private situation to make a public plea on women's sacrifices, education, and possibilities. Through storytelling, Faith learns about herself and her position as a narrator. To do so, she must become aware of her own situation, and acknowledge her own limitations, disputing conventions and traditions of male narrators.

Although Paley's journey in "The Long-Distance Runner" results in the broadening of her social awareness, it is also a journey of self-discovery. By interacting with other women, Faith learns about herself, her situation, and her privilege: "I used to live here," I said. "Oh yes," they said "in the old white days. That time too bad to last" (Paley 250). Faith stays with Mrs. Luddy and her family, and it is through those conversations and stories that she learns the most about herself. Baumgarten claims that Paley's emphasis on orality draws back to Jewish tradition, but adds a different nuance:

Like them, Paley's stories partake of the wonders of oral storytelling. They are the talk by which we come to know ourselves [...]. That is what distinguishes her women from her male characters. In teaching us what it means to listen,

harken and thus, truly speak, Paley's stories define a central aspect of the lives of women in the modern world. (Baumgarten 410)

However, when Faith gets home and tries to tell the story of where she has been, she is met with what Baumgarten mentions, she is neither listened or understood: “‘What are you talking about?’ said Richard. ‘Cut the baby talk’ [...]. Then he said, ‘I don’t know what she’s talking about either’. Neither did Jack” (Paley 264). Even in her position as a narrator, Faith meets the same problems other women endure —her male relatives do not listen to her. It is only among other women that Faith finds understanding.

“Faith in a Tree” operates in a different way. Faith is made aware of the social situation by her son at the end but, as I have previously mentioned, she also must acknowledge her limitations as a woman and as a storyteller. There is a constant tension during the story between her high position as a narrator and her worldly limitations as a woman and as a mother: “We’re a problem to you, Faith, we keep you not free” (Paley 184). Faith is a narrator but, as a female one, she is subjected to duties she seems not to carry out efficiently. In addition, she acknowledges her moral and linguistic limitations: “My vocabulary is adequate for writing notes and keeping journals but absolutely useless for an active moral life” (Paley 184). By being aware of her own constrictions and issues as a narrator, activist, and woman, Faith enriches her experience and highlights her imperfections, allowing the common female reader to identify with her.

To expand the common female experience, Faith must vindicate her own voice as a narrator and that means, metaphorically, killing her father. “A Conversation with My Father” represents a duel between the male literary tradition and an attempt of *écriture féminine*, for Faith writes about and for herself but also about and for all women. It is not casual that her father mentions two of the greatest authors in the realist tradition, Chekhov and Maupassant, for Faith to imitate, denying her own authorial voice. In doing so, the father shows his penchant, not so much for male writers —although he does mention two male authors— but for traditional and canonical writers. As the story progresses, dealing with other topics as generational gaps and cultural changes, the father grows more frustrated: “The father’s frustration with her daughter’s tale stems from being trapped in a resolutely male perspective from which he cannot understand his daughter’s narrative choices” (Ulf 5).

Faith sticks to her purpose until the end, denying the possibility of tragedy and dialectical closure to her character. Therefore, she subverts the male narrative tradition of women suffering tragic destinies due to bad decisions, as with Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary: “She is my knowledge and my invention. [...] Therefore: She did change” (Paley 242). Faith vindicates her own voice and allows her character, and women, the possibility of an open and hopeful destiny. “A Conversation with My Father” constitutes an attempt of *écriture féminine* because it reflects “a time during which the new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old (*la nouvelle de l'ancien*)” (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 875). Women must move away from the past to find and reclaim their voices.

This paper has focused on the role of storytelling as a tool for Faith Darwin, Grace Paley’s most notorious narrator, to construct a broader recollection of female experience and as a way of self-discovery and self-awareness, both as a woman and as a narrator. Faith represents a divergence from the usual observer of the city, for she is committed to her community and intends to improve it through storytelling, acknowledging its fragilities but also highlighting the winsomeness of its complexities. Not only does Faith represent a different kind of observer, but also her way of narrating differs from typical conventions. Hence, it results impossible to analyze Paley’s stories without considering the social and political side. Paley turns Faith into a learner, she becomes an active part of her community by merging with its components and reporting the testimonies. As a result, the stories analyzed “insist upon physical closeness rather than aesthetic distance” (Newman 7). Reporting all those testimonies allows Faith to bridge the spaces between private and public spheres, making the personal political.

In Paley’s short stories, storytelling becomes an ethical duty towards Faith’s community, a way of knitting a wave of testimonies that enrich the female experience and create a collectivity. Paley’s insistence on Faith translating oral conversations into written text resembles what Walter Benjamin thought of the storyteller’s duty:

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. (362)

When Faith reports and tells testimonies of subaltern female groups, she vindicates them and makes them exist. In the way of doing so, and through the stories she listens to and later retells, Faith also learns about her position as a woman and as a female writer; reflecting the teachings Paley had to learn in the way of becoming one herself. The role of Faith, as it is the purpose of storytelling, is to become a bridge between the private and the public female worlds with the aim of vindicating a female voice capable of telling and building an urban set of women's collective experiences, whose foundation is heterogeneity and complexity; a set that collects the livings of white, middle-class women but also those of Jewish immigrants, working-class, African Americans, mothers, and everyone surrounding them.

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#### **About the author**

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