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# Radical Empowerment and Evolution in Fay Weldon's Menippean Satire: The Life and Loves of a She-Devil (1983)

## Abstract

This master's thesis explores Fay Weldon's implementation of Menippean satire in her 1983 novel, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. The present discussion argues Weldon utilizes this specific satiric mode within her novel in order to convey a story of radical female empowerment and evolution that critiques gendered stereotypes of marriage and female roles in society. To make this argument, this thesis applies satire theory, most prominently Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about Menippean satire, as well as marriage and family psychology, to Weldon's characterization of wives, husbands, and mistresses throughout the novel. Through this discussion, Rivera demonstrates the effectiveness of Weldon's social commentary and refutes criticism that deems Weldon's work anti-feminist in nature.

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RADICAL EMPOWERMENT AND EVOLUTION IN FAY WELDON'S MENIPPEAN  
SATIRE: *THE LIFE AND LOVES OF A SHE-DEVIL* (1983)

By

JACKSON AUGUST RIVERA, Bachelor of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
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For the Degree Of  
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## ABSTRACT

This master's thesis explores Fay Weldon's implementation of Menippean satire in her 1983 novel, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. The present discussion argues Weldon utilizes this specific satiric mode within her novel in order to convey a story of radical female empowerment and evolution that critiques gendered stereotypes of marriage and female roles in society. To make this argument, this thesis applies satire theory, most prominently Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about Menippean satire, as well as marriage and family psychology, to Weldon's characterization of wives, husbands, and mistresses throughout the novel. Through this discussion, Rivera demonstrates the effectiveness of Weldon's social commentary and refutes criticism that deems Weldon's work anti-feminist in nature.

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## INTRODUCTION

British author Fay Weldon is arguably one of the most prominent satirists of our time. Known for her fiction, Weldon has been published numerous times, first in 1967 with her novel *The Fat Woman's Joke*, and most recently in 2018, with her novel *Death of a She-Devil*. She additionally has published several plays and short stories. Her more commonly known works include *Praxis* (1978), *Wicked Women* (1995), *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), and *Auto Da Fay* (2002). Much of Weldon's writing focuses on feminist-leaning themes, with heavy uses of satire and irony as tools in making social critiques. Her novels also have a tendency to center on female protagonists, particularly ones who are often disregarded by their surrounding characters and society. She notes on this in a 2016 interview for *The Irish Examiner*, "I've always written about characters like that, because they make up the mass of the female population and tend to be overlooked by media cameras" (Stephenson). In a sense then, Weldon provides narratives of the women society has a tendency to gloss over, be it for their physical appearance and, or, demeanor, or because of consistently reinforced patriarchal standards they may not necessarily fit. Weldon embodies these women in fictional characters with a provocative and distinctive sense of empowerment via biting satirical critiques of these societal expectations that have been set for them, like meeting certain standards of appearance or fulfilling stereotypically feminine roles. This is highly true in the case of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, which focuses on a woman's drastic emotional and physical transformation from an "ugly duckling" whose husband has been cheating on

her throughout the course of their marriage to a self-proclaimed she-devil. In this novel, Weldon specifically targets societally enforced stereotypes for women and marriage using irony and satire as her major tools, and this satire that she relies on is quite arguably Menippean in nature, as I will explain later in this introduction.

Due to the novel's early success and its commercialization via film and television adaptations, Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* arguably falls within the realm of British popular fiction, which is generally accessible to a range of audiences, but like Weldon's novel, may also be packing a significant political punch. Its contents, as literary critic Lauren Berlant argues, are "informed [...] by English feminism of the 1980s," allowing the novel to "speak critically of women's relation to love, locating it within the political economy of feminine suffering shaped by global and patriarchalized regimes of intimacy and labor" that shaped the feminist movement during the decade (245). When reading *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, readers become invested in the story of Ruth, the main character, and her epic journey of avenging her failed marriage through a path to complete mental, physical, sexual, and financial evolution, which incorporates her absurdly and extremely exceeding the gendered expectations for women that were prevalent around the time of the novel's publication. Weldon presents unlikely, even outlandish, plot elements that keep readers in shock but also laughing about Ruth's personal growth and empowerment – while also providing a narrative that is rife with satiric and ironic sentiments.

However, Weldon's satiric targets and messages were, and even still are, often downplayed in the novel's critical reception. *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* has easily

become one of Weldon's more controversial works, specifically in regards to the feminist-leaning topics it addresses. Many critics have gone so far as to dub *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* "anti-feminist" in nature, with statements that criticize her for depicting the main character as revenge-hungry and sexually exploitative, and for pitting Ruth against her husband's mistress. We see this early on in Michiko Kakutani's 1984 *New York Times* review of the novel, which states:

Ruth becomes something of a parody of the "liberated" woman - a bitter harridan bent on using her sexual wiles and a 1970's license for self-indulgence to inflict hurt on others. Her final act - having extensive plastic surgery that makes her irresistible to men - actually seems like a capitulation to the male values she says she despises. Given Miss Weldon's previous work, one would assume that she did not set out in "The Life and Loves of a She-Devil" to write a[n] unforgiving parody of the women's movement - but that's the net result. (Kakutani 17).

Though here, Kakutani recognizes that Weldon is indeed doing something in the realm of satire by deeming the novel a form of parody, she, much like many other earlier critics, argues that Weldon's allowing of Ruth to use sex as currency and to succumb to female beauty standards makes the novel "unforgiving." However, when viewing the novel through the lens of satire theory, there is arguably more than meets the eye in Ruth's narrative. Certainly, if readers discount the irony, there are plot elements of the novel that do fit an anti-feminist reading, but there are many more that support an alternative reading that refutes anti-feminist claims.



In this thesis, I will reveal how Weldon's satirical exploration of feminism and gender roles in terms of marriage and careers in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* critiques gendered social commentary in a manner that is pro-woman, and that exposes the realities women face within society. To do so, I will analyze the novel via the satiric lens of Menippean satire, which is a form of satire that facilitates subversive and ironic messages, as I will explain later in this introduction. My research shows that critics have not used this approach before, which may be a reason that this text has been mislabeled as anti-feminist. In creating Ruth, the she-devil within this novel, Weldon does more than simply illustrate the power of women via a female heroine bent on revenge. She takes a vastly more subversive approach with Ruth than other female literary heroines that have come before her. These fictional predecessors are often either generally independent until overtaken by romance, like Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse, from *Emma* (1815); struggling through male-dominated abusive family and workplace relationships to achieve upward mobility, like Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, from *Jane Eyre* (1847); or striving to achieve psychological liberation, like Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Weldon's she-devil, Ruth, instead stands for an aggressive response to the more extreme effects that society can have on women, and her actions function as a satire of those more traditional characters that came before her. This insight into Weldon's irony is vital to feminist literary scholarship, especially because Weldon takes a harsh satirical angle on both feminine and feminist gender ideals that not many other female authors before, or even during, her period have tried, and that angle is often misconstrued. As a precursor to this specific analysis, this introduction will first provide a

contextualized summary of Weldon's novel, followed by a literature review of the critical discussion surrounding it, the justification for my study, an overview of the theoretical context to be applied in later chapters, and the methodology behind said chapters.

### Contextualized Summary

Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is a work of fiction that employs both first person and third person free indirect narrative to convey the story of Ruth Patchett, an awkwardly large, gangly, and bitter suburban housewife whose accountant-husband, Bobbo, is having an affair with one of his clients. Bobbo's mistress, Mary Fisher, is a beautiful woman and prominent romance novelist, who Ruth comes to hate. Throughout the story, Weldon shifts between Ruth's first person perspective, which provides much of the darker humor in the novel, and the perspective of an unembodied free indirect narrative voice that taps into Ruth's thoughts as well as the thoughts of other characters at key moments. Weldon's multi-voiced narrative is a strong element for conveying ironic social critique with a simultaneously personal and generalized tone. Though the novel was published in 1983, no direct indication is given that would specify an actual time period for the narrative. The most a reader has to go on is context clues, which could include things such as Ruth having access to modern modes of transportation, cosmetic surgery, and computers. Additionally, no real physical setting is ever given during the novel, though some speculate it may be set in New Zealand or England based on Weldon's personal history.

The story of Ruth Patchett begins with quick bursts of narrative exposition, allowing readers to gain much necessary background information in the first few pages

alone through lines such as: “Mary Fisher is loved by my husband, who is her accountant. // I love my husband and I hate Mary Fisher” (Weldon 2). These few pages not only tell readers much about Ruth and the current state of her and Bobbo’s marriage, but also about their life in the fictional suburb of Eden Grove and their roles as parents to their two young children, Nicola and Andy. In terms of their home life, Ruth and Bobbo have lived in material comfort but distinct disharmony since, essentially, their marriage’s inception. Ruth spends her days aiming to please Bobbo and worrying about her ability as a large clumsy woman to measure up to societally enforced standards for wives, while Bobbo spends his longing for a lavish life with his mistress. As readers come to learn more about Ruth and Bobbo’s relationship, they also get real time events, like the preparations being made for an impending dinner visit from Bobbo’s parents. Ruth and Bobbo spend this evening of preparations bickering with one another and exposing readers even more to their marriage’s emotional state, and this steadily leads to a major plot-shifting outburst.

At this dinner with Bobbo’s parents, Ruth’s feelings of inadequacy and hatred for Mary Fisher come to a head, and she ultimately decides to openly defy Bobbo by calling him out for his extramarital affair in front of his parents. Ruth’s exposé sparks a massive argument between her and Bobbo, during which he labels her a “she-devil,” whose only goal in life is to make him miserable. From this moment on, Ruth becomes fueled with a powerful desire to show Bobbo exactly how much of a she-devil she can be, and she thus begins a major evolution that shifts the course of the novel to one of her revenge on all those who have come to make her feel as if she is not a good enough wife. This turning

point becomes the grounds for Weldon's radical satire that ensues during Ruth's rampage against society and her unsettling evolution, and is also what has a tendency to gain her the anti-feminist label by having Ruth incorporate more than just Bobbo in her various acts of revenge that follow.

Ruth and Bobbo ultimately separate the evening of this explosive fight, and Bobbo goes to live in the High Tower, which is Mary Fisher's elegant mansion. With Bobbo gone, Ruth rapidly awakens a side of herself that is quite different from the mistreated, patient, and loving wife and mother that she was before. The first thing Ruth learns in her journey to becoming the she-devil is the power sex can hold over people, which is knowledge she acquires from a sexual encounter with Eden Grove's gardener. Following this, Ruth manipulates her way out of having to care for her and Bobbo's children any longer by burning down their home and moving them in with their father. With the children gone and the stress of caring for them now forced onto Bobbo and Mary, which Ruth happily knows will negatively impact their relationship, she can now devote all of her attention to her evolution, which is chock-full of even more eccentric, even absurd actions that all lead to her embodiment of the she-devil label that Bobbo bestowed upon her.

Most of Ruth's plans from this point in the novel forward involve taking on fake personas that help her win the favor of the people around her so she may enact her revenge. During the time after she forces Nicola and Andy onto Bobbo and Mary, Ruth is also able to force Mary Fisher's elderly mother, Pearl, onto them by using one of her personas to seek employment at Pearl's nursing home and having her banned for

incontinence issues that arise by Ruth's hand. Under this persona, Ruth also starts a temp agency called "Vesta Rose" through which she manages to gain access to Bobbo's place of work and embezzle client money, which leads to his arrest. She then even finds a way to ensure his sentencing is up to her standards by using another persona and becoming a housekeeper, and eventually a sexual partner, for the judge on his case.

As these events unfold, Ruth is profiting at a substantial rate, and with the money for it in hand, she begins the physical element of her transformation to embody what she believes it is that Bobbo, and society, wants her to be, which is essentially Mary Fisher. She undergoes drastic plastic surgeries to make this change, which include procedures such as the reconstruction of her smile and face, removing three inches from her legs to make her more petite, and the reshaping of her figure. During all of this, Ruth even manages to ensure Mary Fisher becomes poor by meddling in her book sales, which, with the cost of caring for Nicola, Andy, and Pearl, proves to be too much for Mary. Because of this, Mary has to sell her High Tower, which Ruth buys and moves into when her surgeries are complete. In the end, Ruth physically embodies Mary Fisher, while the actual Mary is alone, dying of cancer, and forced to raise Ruth and Bobbo's children while he sits in jail. When Bobbo gets out of jail, Ruth takes him back, but only as a sort of sexual subservient who she sometimes even makes watch her sexual affairs with other men. The final she-devil is quite opposite of the Ruth from the beginning of the story, as she is one who now holds much financial, sexual, and psychological power over the people in her life, especially Bobbo and Mary.

## Literature Review

In terms of its reception, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* has seen a larger amount of critical attention than Weldon's other works, and this is prominently due to this novel's specific satirical approach to feminist-leaning topics. Despite the amassed attention given to *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, the scholarly criticism as a whole is still fairly limited in scope and amount. Due to its very recent release, and the difficulty of even obtaining a copy of the work in the United States, the novel's sequel, *Death of a She-Devil*, has seen no literary criticism that was accessible to me at the time of writing this thesis, and thus will not be discussed in the following literature review.

Literary critics began to analyze Weldon's novel around the late 1980s, with the first piece being relevant to this study specifically being released in 1988. This does not fall too far from the novel's publication, which was in 1983. Much of the initial reception of the novel was in the form of interviews with the author and book reviews, rather than literary criticism. As time has passed and society has continued to evolve in terms of queer and feminist theory, the available criticism has grown, with the most recent piece being covered in this study having been published in 2011.

In terms of available content from the 1980s, it appears that Alan Wilde's "'Bold, but Not Too Bold': Fay Weldon and the Limits of Poststructuralist Criticism," published in 1988, functions as the critical conversation starter in regards to *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. Essentially, his piece lays the groundwork for future literary criticism of Weldon's text, and does so using postmodernist, poststructuralist, and feminist lenses to analyze Ruth and her journey to becoming the she-devil. Wilde's major claim argues that

Weldon's novel is a "Sadecan assault on the reader's expectations and beliefs" related to her feminism, and this is evident in the way Ruth's transformation ironically subverts her from the feminist figure she thinks she is becoming into what she actually abhors (Wilde 406). To explore this, Wilde examines Weldon's narrative style in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and ultimately argues that the way the story is presented reflects a division in Weldon's own feelings regarding feminism, particularly the distance between her views and her feminist predecessors' views. Wilde's perspective is useful to refuting anti-feminist claims that come after his work, particularly in that he points out Weldon's desire to distinguish herself from other feminist writers, which arguably is why she takes the more controversial approach that provokes labels like that of an "anti-feminist."

Following Wilde on from the 1980s, 1990s criticism again is sparse in amount, but still contributes nicely to the conversation. Shirley Peterson's "Freaking Feminism: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Nights at the Circus* as Narrative Freakshows" joins the discussion in 1996, with a specific focus on the element of "female freakishness," in Weldon's novel as well as Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Peterson takes an approach to Weldon and Carter that varies slightly from Wilde's in 1988 in that she looks more closely at sexuality and female "otherness" as they are exhibited in each author's respective works. Peterson relates this "otherness" to the notion of women being labeled as "freaks" or "freakish," and argues that women are historically linked to these terms due to patriarchal standards for things such as their appearance and behavior. With *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* specifically, Peterson analyzes how Weldon utilizes "freakishness" for her feminist agenda by foregrounding

the freaky, here being the female who does not fit society's standards for her, and the power that comes from embracing and redefining labels like "freak" or, in Ruth's case, "she-devil." Like Wilde, Peterson's argument is one that also works well to refute anti-feminist critics in that it suggests Ruth's evolution can be read as empowering, and that in turn makes her narrative relatable to readers who may feel similar to her. From Peterson, we can gather that though Weldon's approach is controversial, it is undeniable that there are still pro-woman elements at play.

Sara Martin adds to the 1990s critical conversation in '99 with her article on "The Power of Monstrous Women," which again analyzes Weldon alongside Carter and another author, Jeanette Winterson. Martin works to somewhat disagree with her predecessors, and argues that though Weldon and the authors she is being related to do provide satirical, monstrous depictions of feminist heroines, their power exhibited is too limited by this satire and is done better in novels written by men. Martin does this via discussion of the "implicit androphobic discourse" in the works being covered in her essay, by which she means a discussion of the elements of each novel which imply in some way that women are to fear men. Martin states that the message taken from Weldon's text specifically is "women are trapped by their addiction to men's own addiction to pretty women" (195). For Martin, Ruth seems to "exchange one form of submission for another" in her transformation from the mistreated housewife she is at the beginning to her final form of the she-devil (195). Despite this more anti-feminist reading that implies Weldon's novel promotes women being subservient to men, Martin does seem to backpedal a bit and ultimately states it is crucial for female authors to portray



women the way Weldon does, because the same narrative coming from a male author would be what we are already accustomed to in literature. Having a woman write this story puts the power in her hands, rather than leaving it up to a man to represent the female and feminine.

Expansion in the critical conversation seems to have grown substantially in the 2000s and into the 2010s. This is arguably due to the growth in queer and feminist based research and publications during these years. As a general assessment of themes from the sources pertaining to these decades, quite a few concern themselves with Weldon's satire of female expectations of appearance and identity in relation to both natural and cosmetically enhanced elements. Works that fall within this critical angle include Virginia Blum's 2005 essay, "Becoming the Other Woman: The Psychic Drama of Cosmetic Surgery," Brooks Bourson's "The Culture of Appearances and the Socially Invisible Woman in Anita Brookner's *Look at Me*, Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark*, and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*," from 2009, and Mara Reisman's "The Shifting Moral Ground in Fay Weldon's Fiction" from 2011.

Other critics from these years focus on concepts such as lesbian subtexts, female power as it relates to a masculine-dominated society, and the model of a "good woman" that Weldon conveys with her main character's journey to recreate herself. Examples here include Patricia Juliana Smith's essay from 2000 entitled "Women Like Us Must Learn to Stick Together: Lesbians in the Novels of Fay Weldon," Sarah Aguiar's 2001 essay entitled "The Art of Becoming a Bitch," and Lauren Berlant's essay "The Compulsion to Repeat Femininity: *Landscape for a Good Woman* and *The Life and Loves of a She-*

*Devil*” from 2008. This growth of discourse in the body of criticism for Weldon’s novel helped to expand the sides of the pro-woman versus anti-feminist debate, with a major point across the board being that there are elements of the novel that suit an anti-feminist label. From these critics’ collective points, and using a satiric lens, then, one can work to refute the anti-feminist claims by focusing on the satirical critique being made and the method for doing so.

Across all of this available critical content, a common premise is the tendency to address Weldon’s text alongside other female novelists, like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and Toni Morrison, to name a few. Less of the critical reception for Weldon looks at her singularly, and even fewer critics address the satirical model and devices of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* specifically.

Few accessible masters’ theses have analyzed Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, but there are indeed some in existence. In 1991, Marina Berts wrote on the supernatural in Weldon’s work, but focused on both Weldon’s short stories and novels, merely touching on *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* as a part of Weldon’s body of work. In 1993, Marja Tulokas explored female characterization in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* alongside Weldon’s 1971 novel, *Down Among the Women*. In 2007, Harriet Blymiller wrote a thesis entitled *The Constructions of Fay Weldon, Woman of Letters*, which analyzed Weldon’s style of writing throughout her career, with a brief mention of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* near the end of it. In 2008, Salla Makinen wrote on the female body and heterosexual order in Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, with a focus on the elements of cosmetic surgery used in the novel. Much like the

aforementioned critical articles and reviews of Weldon's novel, aside from Makinen's, these available theses have a tendency to focus on *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* alongside other works or in combination with her entire body of work, rather than solely looking at it and its sequel. They additionally take approaches mainly to Weldon's writing style, techniques, and genre, rather than looking directly at the satirical elements at play.

### Justification

Weldon's novel provides rich material for analysis via satire theory, and this analysis could certainly be stretched further than what is already available. While scholars have analyzed aspects of identity, appearance, morality, lesbian subtexts, and feminine power in the novel, it appears that a comprehensive study of Weldon's use of satire has never been published. This is especially true of the elements of marriage and the roles of husband and wife that Weldon explores, which few critics have analyzed. From that, I gather there is an evident gap with respect to satire theory and little support for a pro-woman reading in the current critical discussion of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. This thesis will aim to develop this perspective by applying satire theory to analyze Weldon's social commentary on femininity and feminist concepts within the novel. My approach will help answer why Weldon's work takes feminist protest literature into a more controversial direction than previous authors before her, and why, because of that, it is not wholly deserving of an anti-feminist label.

Weldon appears to have her own distinct aim with her satire in regards to feminism, and it is often misconstrued. Though Weldon's novel reads as sarcastic and

provocative in terms of how a reader comes away from it viewing feminism, femininity, and related marital concepts, it is not intended to follow directly along the guidelines that feminists have come to give their movement. Those who read *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* as anti-feminist tend to have one main argument that comes in different variations, but boils down to the notion that the novel focuses too heavily on encouraging female rivalry. They find, “the question Weldon’s novel leaves us with is how we ended up fantasizing more about the damage we could do to the other woman than to the man who went off with her” (Blum 117). As this thesis will demonstrate, though, Weldon’s satire is Menippean in nature, and thus purposefully critiques the absurdity of gendered expectations for women while also pushing the reader to engage more deeply with their own critical thought process about said concepts. Certainly, it would seem at first glance that Ruth’s actions fail to lift up the women around her throughout the novel, but when considering her own personal evolution, there is an undeniable pro-woman element to what Weldon is doing with the narrative.

When asked directly about the anti-feminist criticism her novel has received, Weldon has remarked: “I think feminists are always jumping up and down about one thing or another. [...] I don’t think they read me, actually. I confuse them. In fact, any serious feminist spits when I go by – and well she should” (Reisman 646). Literary critic Mara Reisman evaluates this response from Weldon quite aptly, stating:

Weldon’s comments reflect a shift in British feminism from a movement initially concerned with promoting women’s voice and women’s equality to an increasingly fragmented one influenced by identity politics, which also included a

strong separatist contingent. It is this latter position that Weldon defines as the “serious feminists.” Weldon’s depiction of discontented feminists is both personal and political. At the personal level, it represents her way of diminishing the “anti-male” position that she was criticized for not embracing her whole life. In this regard, Weldon’s description can be read as a defense of her choices of marriage and motherhood. However, her remarks also have greater political significance. They exemplify Weldon’s position on ideologies (including feminism): nothing should be sacred. (646-7)

In Reisman’s evaluation of Weldon’s supposedly anti-feminist aims, it is evident that Weldon does not necessarily care about pushing the boundaries of feminism – in fact, that is arguably her goal. She notes, to Weldon, “nothing should be sacred” in terms of ideologies, and that is exactly what a reader sees play out in Ruth’s evolution. Ruth becoming the she-devil through various acts of transformation and revenge pushes questioning of ideologies related to marriage, femininity, and feminism. These ideologies are not sacred to the satirist, which Weldon is simply conveying by testing their limits. As literary critic Sara Martin finds in her own discussion of Weldon, “This refusal to commit herself to the feminist cause is in itself the reason why Weldon’s books are so provocative, and so ambiguous, but is also the reason why the edge of a novel such as *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is blunt” (199).

From acknowledging Weldon’s own stance on readers’ views of her writing, especially in the case of Ruth’s story, it is easy to then further refute anti-feminist claims by contending that Weldon aims to point out a personal level of change that can occur

when a woman breaks free from her societally induced confinements, not to feed into any sort of directly feminist agenda. We see this in the way Ruth's evolution becomes more and more personal as it goes on, which the aforementioned Berlant provides a useful comment on. She states: "At first it will seem that the novel locates the merger of women with femininity and femininity with love plots in a satire of their normalizing institutions, discourses, and desires. Yet by the end of the book, as often happens, political knowledge drops out of the narrator's consciousness and, once again, it is only the personal sphere that is susceptible to radical change" (Berlant 245). This personal sphere of change that occurs for Ruth also occurs for the reader by way of Weldon's satire, and as will be argued in this thesis, the aim then is for readers to rethink their own views of concepts like femininity, feminism, and marriage, not to convince them of any one specific right answer to issues that arise from said concepts. This can be evidenced in yet another quote from Weldon herself, who argues in all of her writing: "I want to lead people to consider and explore ideas that aren't very popular, which many people would rather not think about. But if anybody's to get anywhere, they had better think about it" (Smith 87).

With all of that being said, it is clear that Weldon's satiric approach to Ruth's story is one that is distinct to her own beliefs regarding the issues she addresses within it, and this does not necessarily make her satire completely anti-feminist. Her goal is not to indoctrinate readers into a feminist stance against rigid expectations for femininity or marriage, but rather to provoke questioning of how we define those notions for ourselves and implicate related personal the changes we wish to see in our lives. Ruth is largely empowered by her evolution, and it is undeniable that the personal changes she makes

provide large growth for her character in multiple areas. Certainly, Ruth's evolution is far from positive in many aspects. Weldon comes to acknowledge this fact near the end of the novel, when, in her narration, Ruth admits that despite all of the changes she has made to her life, Mary Fisher has still won on the more positively feminist-leaning front. For Ruth, it is about her own agenda all along, which she accepts in stating: "She-devils can make nothing better, except themselves" (Weldon 231).

From Weldon's own input as well as the input of critics like Reisman, Martin, Berlant, and Smith, it is apparent that Weldon's fiction, especially in the case of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, has a satiric function that is specifically attributable to her own philosophies for writing about women, and this function deserves the critical attention it currently lacks. Weldon is writing for the sake of expressing herself as a novelist telling an outrageous story, but at the same time, she wants her readers to engage with her satiric approach so as to encourage individual thought about the feminist concepts she chooses to address.

### Theoretical Context

Traditionally, satire in a general sense can be defined as "a work that blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of exposing and improving human institutions," and is "aimed more at groups or types of people and less at individuals" (Harmon and Holman). Satire can occur in varying forms – including verse, drama, and prose – but as Dustin Griffin notes: "The novel, more than any other literary form, has proved extremely hospitable to satire" (4). We see this in the case of Weldon's novel, as

she embeds her satire within narrative as an effective means of making relevant social commentary that has slowly but surely provoked critical discourse over time.

In 2007, satire theorist and literary critic Ruben Quintero published a collection of groundbreaking essays that reexamine satire-theory, titled *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*. In the introductory chapter, Quintero argues that satirists are proficient mainly based in their ability to be so “singularly dissatisfied and wanting to tell others about it” with their work (Quintero 1). This dissatisfaction is generally in regards topics of social importance, “groups or types of people” whom the satirist feels should be questioned by their audience, or even social or political concepts that may fall under the same distinction (Harmon and Holman). Quintero also notes a satirist writes “not merely out of personal indignation, but with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest,” which is certainly evident in Weldon’s text, as she provokes questions about the way readers view marriage and feminist-leaning concepts through her own satire (1). Quintero additionally notes that a satirist can “serve as a cautionary prophet or an idealistic visionary,” who “attempts more than visceral laughter or corrosive spite” (1-2). Essentially, and again in Weldon’s case, satirists are bent on exposing the thing they are dissatisfied with, and thus prompting an audience to see their perspective and perhaps question that thing on their own. Their aim in writing is more than merely one that is comedic; it is intentional. However, it is also important to note: “The satirist is not obligated to solve what is perceived as a problem or replace what is satirically disassembled or unmasked with a solution” (Quintero 3). This is also important to Weldon’s text, as an analysis of her satire as pro-woman requires a reader to keep this



point in mind – that, for Weldon, what it means to be pro-woman remains an open-ended question subject to many points of view.

Satire can be either direct, which is also referred to as formal, or indirect, with direct satire being more of a first person attack on a reader, person, or character that the satirist describes, and indirect satire being employed more as a narrative via characters or an actual narrator. In the case of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Weldon utilizes her shifting narrative point of view to move between both direct and indirect satire, but provides much of her more commonly criticized social commentary via the indirect nature of Menippean satire, which stems from earlier genres. Satire as a whole has origins that are commonly questioned and disputed. We can trace formal, direct satire to the “genre-conscious Roman period,” where it was more commonly written in verse form and referred to as “satura,” which Quintero notes as meaning a “medley or hodgepodge” (6). Quintero adds on this Ancient Roman origin story: “In this tradition, the satirical poet provides a virtuoso offering of theme, fable, tone, parody, and figurative expression, something like a platter or bowl displaying mixed fruits or food dishes (*lanx satura*) in a variegated but artful composition” (7). Quintero goes on to explain that both Horace and Juvenal, who easily became major figures in formal satire’s origins and stylistic distinctions via their highly studied writings. While they are both considered to be innovators of the formal, direct mode, Horatian satire came to be known as more refined, with a tendency to use gentle strikes rather than direct attacks against its target. Juvenalian satire is known to be more acrimonious and heated, and relies on the use of invective, which Quintero describes as “only a shade away from gross individual insult of

unequivocal censure or condemnation” (5). Though Weldon’s story fits some of the characteristics of both Horatian and, even more so, Juvenalian satire, its Menippean elements are what support a pro-woman reading.

Outside of Rome, indirect satire developed in the works of Greek and Latin writers, like the Greek philosopher Menippus, who we attribute Menippean satire to, and like the Latin writer Terentius Varro, who we attribute Varronian satire to. Today, these two are less well known and often a bit more difficult to distinguish from one another than Horatian and Juvenalian forms of satire, though we do see the term Menippean used more commonly than Varronian. Quintero argues as a general basis: “This form of indirect satire uses narrative to lambaste, parody, or make ironic fun of its satiric objective, usually through dialogue between fools, knaves, or ironists” (7). Additionally, this form combines prose and verse, and has a tendency to adopt a more revolutionary stance against forces of authority or the status quo. Works of this satiric nature have become more popularized and variable over time, which is what makes it difficult to define the confines of the form.

Literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye prefers to use the term “anatomy” to refer to satire that is Menippean in nature, which leaves room for the form to evolve instead of basing its characteristics on ancient texts. Literary scholar W. Scott Blanchard argues Menippean satire “refuses to allow an ideal type to emerge from its chaotic sprawl, whereas Roman satire achieves its effect by contrasting the debased world of the present to models of human behavior that are acceptable” (18-19). Mikhail Bakhtin, however, has been one scholar that has provided more distinct characteristics of the

Menippea, which he defines in his work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. As I will detail in the methods section of this introduction, Bakhtin's theory on Menippean satire is what I will rely heavily on for my analysis of Weldon's novel. Bakhtin contends the Menippean form includes many key characteristics working together in organic unity to provide a critique. While a work may meet all of these characteristics, it may only meet a select few distinctly, which he additionally argues would not disqualify it from a Menippean label. The latter scenario is what occurs with Weldon's novel, and thus only the applicable characteristics will be described below, and then explored further in the later chapters of this thesis.

The first piece from Bakhtin's work that is relevant to an analysis of Weldon's novel states Menippean satire's most important characteristic "lies in the fact that the most daring and unfettered fantasies and adventures are internally motivated, justified and illuminated here by a purely ideological and philosophical end – to create *extraordinary situations* in which to provoke and test a philosophical idea" (94). Ideally, then, works of Menippean satire will prompt a reader to question philosophical concepts either inside of themselves or within society. This is certainly something applicable to Weldon's novel, as Ruth's journey to her she-devil form prompts many questions about feminist concepts and gendered expectations for women.

The next relevant characteristic Bakhtin identifies is what he calls the "moral-psychological experimentation," which consists of "the representation of man's unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states - insanity of all sorts ("maniac themes"), or insanity, suicide, etc." (96). In a sense, this characteristic contends that Menippean satire

experiments with abnormal morality and, or, altered psychological states, which are both things a reader encounters in Weldon's novel via Bobbo's characterization throughout and Ruth's characterization during her transformation. To add to this, Bakhtin also argues Menippean satire contains scenes of "eccentric behavior, incongruous speeches and performances" that violate "established norms of behavior" or etiquette (96). These are again things we see occur with both Bobbo and Ruth, as Bobbo violates norms of behavior in his affairs, and Ruth violates societal and feminist expectations in her evolution following their separation.

Bakhtin additionally notes Menippean satire is fond of "sharp contrasts" and "sharp transitions and changes" in the plot, and "characteristically makes use of other genres: novellas, letters, oratory, symposia, etc." (97). These two characteristics are both observable in Weldon's novel, as the plot is rife with sharp contrasts between the roles of wives versus husbands, as well as sharp transitions and changes in the plot as Ruth works towards her end goals in her evolution. In terms of making use of other genres, Ruth abides by the "Litany of the Good Wife," and this litany becomes a crucial text for Weldon to employ her satire throughout the novel with.

The last, and arguably most relevant characteristic Bakhtin identifies is Menippean satire's "topicality and publicistic quality. This is in its way the 'journalistic' genre of antiquity, pointedly reacting to the ideological issues of the day" (97). This characteristic becomes an overarching recurrence in Weldon's novel, as she works to address ideological issues with marriage, gender roles, and feminism throughout the course of the narrative. Additionally, being that one of the biggest things Ruth must work

towards in her evolution is financial independence, this also makes the novel topically relevant to British feminism during the time of its publication, which was largely bent on workplace equality for women. In combination with the previously listed characteristics, Weldon's topicality and reactions to relevant ideological issues functions to project a pro-woman message and powerful social critique via the Menippean form.

In addition to the Menippean characteristics that Bakhtin identifies within *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he also defines characteristics of carnivalized literature. Carnivalized literature is what Bakhtin argues Menippean satire is inherently bonded to. He notes: "The carnival attitude possesses an indestructible vivacity and the mighty, life-giving power to transform" (88). Certainly, Weldon's novel has the ability to transform the way readers view ideologies related to marriage, femininity, and feminism, and while much of that is largely attributable to her application of Menippean satire, her novel also plays with what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque notions of crowning and discrowning to enhance her social critique. The notions of crowning and discrowning are key to the carnival, which Bakhtin contends, "is the festival of all-destroying and all-renewing time" (102). He additionally states: "Crowning and discrowning is a two-in-one, ambivalent ritual expressing the inevitability, and simultaneously the creativity, of change and renewal, the *jolly relativity* of every system and order, every authority and every (hierarchical) position" (102). Essentially, the symbolic crowning and discrowning in carnivalesque literature is representative of a shift in power that is transformative. We see this in Weldon's novel, as Bobbo initially wears the crown in his marriage to Ruth, but is discrowned when she evolves into the she-devil and claims the crown for herself.

Bobbo's discrowning is highly transformative for Ruth's narrative and for the critique Weldon makes, especially since it is a major catalyst for Ruth's financial evolution that plays with ideas of 1980s British feminism.

Weldon's novel utilizes these characteristics of Menippean satire and the carnival to develop many ironic sentiments. In this way, Weldon's use of satire and irony support each other, but there is a distinction between satire and irony here that is quite pertinent. Irony can be defined as a figure of speech in which the speaker's actual intent is expressed in words with an opposite meaning. It is often less harsh than satire, but can still have the effect of making a valuable critique or commentary. In Petit's aforementioned chapter from *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, titled "Irony and Satire," she notes on this: "There is no necessary connection between irony and satire; indeed, they would seem to exclude each other. Irony works through ambiguity, while satire must be plain and clear (albeit amusing) to make its point" (510). She additionally states: "It would take a singularly dull mind to grapple with the question whether something is satirical or not. Irony, on the other hand, belongs to the individual, not the generic, both on the level of the author and that of the audience" (Petit 510). From Petit, then, we can gather that irony utilizes a more subtle, even philosophical mode of critique, while satire has a tendency to be more clear in its intentions and accessible to a wider range of audiences. Essentially, irony is in the eye of the beholder. Irony more commonly occurs in Weldon's novel in her jabs at the double standards that are evident in expectations for husbands as opposed to wives, and additionally in Ruth's perspective on the outcome of her evolution, both of which will be analyzed more in further chapters.

## Methodology

Ultimately, to meet the evident gap in the current critical discussion of Weldon's novel, this thesis will provide the missing analysis of her satirical views of marital roles and societal expectations for women. I will focus this analysis using a satiric lens, with emphasis on the previously listed characteristics of Menippean satire, and work to point out the components of the novel that are empowering and pro-woman. Essentially, I will argue that Weldon's implementation of this Menippean mode of satire functions to both convey and critique these concepts of marital roles and societal expectations for women through her constructions of characters like her protagonist, Ruth, and Ruth's husband, Bobbo, and the plot elements that ensue following their separation. Weldon has an ostensible purpose as a satirist addressing a popular fiction audience, and within that purpose, she not only exposes gendered inequities, but also the potential that power has to corrupt a person.

To make this argument, I will predominately apply satire theory taken from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. I will also apply theories from his work titled *Discourse on the Novel*, specifically the portions in which he discusses the concept of heteroglossia, and the multi-voiced function of novels. As additional scaffolding for this satirical analysis, I will apply definitions and support from Dustin Griffin's *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* and Ruben Quintero's portion in *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, both of which provide relevant discussions of satire in general, as well as more specific identifications of irony and its role in more invective approaches to satiric commentary. Additionally, Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit's chapter of A

*Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, titled “Irony and Satire,” will be used for clarifying distinctions between irony and satire as needed.

I will additionally apply theory taken from the field of marriage and family psychology, which will prove useful as a support in my argument that one of Weldon’s main aims is to critique what society has come to deem as acceptable behavior for wives and husbands. My main scholars in this area will be Mary Ann Lamanna and Agnes Reidmann, and the ideas they discuss in their textbook, *Marriage and Families: Making Choices in a Diverse Society*. This text provides numerous relevant analyses of marriage and family theories and their implications on modern society as well as statistical analyses of marriage and family trends. As additional support in this area, I will also turn to Stephanie Coontz, a marriage and family psychologist who specializes in marriage’s history and evolution. She details this in her text, *Marriage, A History*, which I will incorporate passages from in order to discuss why Ruth and Bobbo behave as they do within their marriage, and why Weldon writes their relationship as she does. Lastly, from this area of theory, I will incorporate concepts taken from marriage and family psychologist John Gottman’s popular text, *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*, which includes theories and statistical evidence regarding why and how marriages fail, and the potential solutions to those issues.

To apply the aforementioned theory directly to Weldon’s text, I will separate my argument into three main chapters. These chapters will be structured around notions taken from Weldon’s “Litany of the Good Wife,” which Ruth abides by prior to her evolution into the she-devil. In the first chapter, titled, “The Good Wife,” I will provide



the text of this litany as well as an analysis of the components of it which will be categorized into these sections: silence, emotional satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and financial status. Within these sections, I will employ the relevant satire theory and marriage and family theory in order to convey Weldon's social commentary and critiques of the roles of wives in society. This chapter will predominately focus on Ruth prior to her evolution, with the specific intent to function as a basis of comparison for the role Bobbo plays as a husband and Ruth's eventual form as the evolved she-devil. At the end of this chapter, I will provide a section on the outcomes of striving to be a good wife, which will add to my discussion of Weldon's novel being pro-woman in many ways, rather than ant-feminist.

Chapter two of this thesis, then, will be titled "The Bad Husband," and will work to analyze Weldon's satiric critiques of a man's role within marriage and compare them to the drastically different standards that women are given by society. I will apply the similar sections as I did in the first chapter, with the intent to expose the ironic double standards that the litany implies, which becomes justification for Ruth's major evolution. I will again incorporate a section on the outcomes, here of being a bad husband, which will add to the discussion of the variance in gendered expectations for marital roles and how that plays into Ruth's evolution.

Chapter three of this thesis will be titled "The Evolved Woman," and will focus chiefly on Ruth during her evolution into the she-devil. I will again apply the sections taken from the categorization of the litany used in chapter one, but will here work to explore how Ruth's evolution functions to flip the litany on its head and provide a

hyperbolized example of what becomes of a woman who breaks free of its restrictions. There will be an outcomes section provided here as well, with the major focus being a discussion of the pro-woman and anti-feminist notions of Ruth's evolution that Weldon is openly aiming to convey.

In the concluding chapter, I will provide a wrap-up of this discussion by exploring the satiric takeaway from Weldon's novel. Additionally, within this chapter, I will provide a brief discussion of how Weldon furthers and somewhat alters the direction of her social commentary and critiques in the novel's 2018 sequel, *Death of a She-Devil*. Weldon's critiques made in both novels are well worth exploring with the Menippean lens, as she is a satirist who too often been undeservingly criticized as anti-feminist for her narrative approaches.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The “Good Wife”

The concept of marriage is one that has certainly come to evolve over time, especially in regards to how the components within it – traditionally husband and wife, though in some cases, this may vary – are viewed by society. At its simplest form, marriage is a union between two people who are willing to vow to spend their lives together. Though in earlier periods of history, marriage may have been more of a political or economic move, it has evolved over time to supposedly be more predominately driven by love. Within a marriage, there is now the expectation that the two people engaging in the union will love one another indefinitely, through good times and bad, and will remain loyal to one another in every sense of the word. Many great works of literature – poems, short stories, novels – have come to highlight marriage as an important life goal for men and women. Authors exemplify it as the final step in defining a loving, fulfilling relationship, but that was not necessarily always its purpose, and arguably still is not in many cases. In the introduction to her book titled *Marriage, a History*, contemporary family scholar Stephanie Coontz notes:

For centuries, marriage did much of the work that markets and governments do today. It organized the production and distribution of goods and people. It set up political, economic, and military alliances. It coordinated the division of labor by gender and age. It orchestrated people's personal rights and obligations in everything from sexual relations to the inheritance of property. Most societies had very specific rules about how people should arrange their marriages to accomplish these tasks. (9)

From Coontz's detailing of marriage's past, it is easy to see how the roles within marriage have come to be shaped by its evolution. Certainly, in twentieth century Western society, we see fewer marriages for the sake of political gain or military alliances, but that is not to say that people in the 1980s married without underlying financial and social intentions in mind. These original intentions behind marriage have also functioned to shape how society views wives versus husbands, with wives traditionally being valued less in terms of the power they have within the union.

Marriage stems from various patriarchal institutions, and thus has a tendency to define the masculine role of husband as the one with the majority of the power, and the feminine role of wife as subordinate to the husband. In the late 1980s, marriage was portrayed in literature, television, and movies as a woman's top priority and end goal in life. From this, one can gather marriage often had the ability to make or break a woman's social status, especially in regards to how she performed her "wifely duties" and represented her family. She was expected to serve her husband, maintain his household, and bear and raise his children. Ideally, a married woman would not work, as this would

interfere with her ability to perform these responsibilities. As is evident in the progress made by the third wave of feminism, though, this has shifted significantly from the 1980s. Today, women's work outside the home is more of an accepted reality, but that is not to say that equality has been attained.

These notions of a wife's responsibilities in the 1980s are something that female British satirist Fay Weldon strives to critique in her novel, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, as a component of her overarching satire of marriage and the gendered restrictions it places on women. Weldon does this in terms of wives particularly with the construction of the main character Ruth Patchett's empowering evolution from what Weldon defines as a "good wife" to her later form, the "she-devil." Ruth's marriage is one that is born not out of love on her husband's sake, but rather out of obligation, and this lays much of the groundwork for the destruction of their relationship over time.

#### The "Litany of the Good Wife"

At the beginning of Weldon's novel, readers are made aware of the motivation behind Ruth's desires to stay with Bobbo and function as a good wife to him from the beginning of their marriage, even though it is born out of obligation. In flashbacks to Ruth's past, Weldon reveals that Ruth has been taught from an early age that she is physically unattractive in comparison to other women, and thus should be quite concerned about how she will fulfill her sole duty in life – becoming a wife. Readers are also told of how Ruth's mother would refer to her as her "little ugly duckling," and would tell Ruth she was "the image of [her] father" (Weldon 7). From early on, then, Ruth is indoctrinated with the notion that she must work harder at being a wife if she is so lucky

to become one, because her appearance is not up to society's standards. We see this indoctrination furthered in Ruth's education, which she also discusses in the form of a flashback. The school she attended was a convent, which focused on educating its solely female students in "household graces," with an aim at encouraging "stoicism, not selfish emotions or attention-seeking tears" (Weldon 26). Knowing this, it is not hard to imagine, then, that Ruth believes she must abide by what she introduces in her narration as "The Litany of the Good Wife."

This "Litany of the Good Wife" Ruth follows comes to shape how she behaves within her marriage, and provides much of the context as to why she has allowed her relationship with Bobbo to escalate to the point it is at when readers are brought into her story. It feeds into Weldon's application of Menippean satiric techniques, per Bakhtin's definition, specifically because it is a set of rules that form an "extreme ideologism" that puts ultimate philosophical questions regarding female equality within marriage to the test, and additionally in that it is an explicit list embedded in the narrative as a means of "parody and objectivization" of societally enforced standards for women (Bakhtin 95). The way the litany is brought into the story points directly to this. It is presented to readers during an early moment of strife between Ruth and Bobbo, in which she reveals that during these situations, she turns to the litany as a reminder of her "matrimonial duties, to wifedom and motherhood, and [her] in-laws" (Weldon 22). She looks to the litany as a sort of ideology of her role as Bobbo's wife, and a reminder of how grateful she should be to have found a husband in the first place. It is dripping with ironic sentiments when considering their relationship, and reads as follows:

1. I must pretend to be happy when I am not; for everyone's sake.
2. I must make no adverse comment on the manner of my existence; for everyone's sake.
3. I must be grateful for the roof over my head and the food on my table, and spend my days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from my chair; for everyone's sake.
4. I must make my husband's parents like me, and my parents like him; for everyone's sake.
5. I must consent to the principle that those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home; for everyone's sake.
6. I must build up my husband's sexual confidence, I must not express any sexual interest in other men, in private or in public; I must ignore his way of diminishing me by publicly praising younger, prettier, and more successful women than I, and sleeping with them in private, if he can; for everyone's sake.
7. I must render him moral support in all his undertakings, however immoral they may be, for the marriage's sake. I must pretend in all matters to be less than he.
8. I must love him through wealth and poverty, through good times and bad, and not swerve in my loyalty to him, for everyone's sake. (Weldon 23)<sup>1</sup>

Though this litany is usually what brings Ruth back to a place of, arguably, subservience, in the instance it comes into the novel, it "incenses her" (Weldon 23). Bobbo has finally

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<sup>1</sup> Numbering of the rules of the "Litany of the Good Wife" has been added for the sake of organization within this thesis, and is not included in Weldon's original text.

admitted to her that their marriage is “one of convenience” (Weldon 19), and Ruth is deeply upset by this, as she should be. She has spent their entire relationship, which makes up a large portion of her life, working to be the good wife she is expected to be, and she sees no appreciation for that from Bobbo or anyone around her, for that matter. Because of this realization, along with Bobbo later labeling her a “she-devil,” Ruth decides to transform herself and stray far away from the litany she has been brainwashed into following, which largely feeds a pro-woman reading of Weldon’s novel in that Ruth directly aims to dismiss the standards she has been taught to abide by. Before discussing the woman she evolves into, though, it is first necessary to examine the marital issues that lead to this, which directly stem from Ruth’s obedience of the litany and her desire to fit the ideals of the good wife.

The litany can be separated into four main categories of ideologies, which we see Ruth adhere to in order to demonstrate her “love” and appreciation for Bobbo. These categories are: silence, emotional satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and financial status. In each instance, Weldon specifically makes a statement that feeds into her satiric critique of what patriarchal society deems as the wife’s role in marriage, and engages with concepts of femininity and feminism in a manner that lends itself well to a pro-woman reading when viewed with the Menippean lens.

### Silencing the Good Wife

In seven out of the eight rules of the litany, the phrase “for everyone’s sake” is attached to the end. In each instance, there is an expectation that Ruth will, essentially, place others’ needs before her own. To do this, she must not voice her issues with



whatever the rule states. This is also distinctly reinforced in rule two, during the part that reads: “I will make no adverse comment on the manner of my existence” (Weldon 23). Ruth must be silent, or, as the old phrase goes, “seen and not heard.” This repetitive notion of withholding her feelings directly places Ruth in a position of inconvenience and subordination. The implication is, if people know she is unhappy, it will ruin the entire dynamic of the marital, familial, and social norms that come along with her and Bobbo’s union. In her previously mentioned work, Berlant writes about a similar concept to this notion of silence, which she dubs “women’s situation.” This concept refers to the expectations of women enforced upon them by society, and even themselves, and “what identifying with fantasies of conventionality can do for and to women amid the project of surviving a world that can wear you out” (Berlant 233). In the case of Weldon’s novel, it is arguable that the litany enforces an unbearable sense of conventionality upon Ruth, and in turn, complacency with her situation until she finally breaks free from it and empowers herself with a newfound sense of equality, rather than subservience. Prior to this, though, Ruth clearly believes she must be obedient to the standards of a good wife and grateful to have been married at all, and thus strictly binds herself to this sense of silence for much of the course of her marriage.

What is ironic about this element of silence being enforced upon Ruth is the level of disdain for her situation that she expresses within her narration of silent thought prior to her breaking point and eventual transformation. Ruth holds nothing back in this element of narration, but when it comes to actually speaking her peace, she abides by her litany and remains silent, allowing Bobbo’s actions to transpire with no objection. This is

inherently ironic in that we as the readers know her true feelings, but none of the characters interacting with Ruth do as well until she finally breaks.

Weldon employs Ruth's enforced silence, then, as a tool in her critique of marital roles, especially in regards to how women are historically expected to follow along with what men deem fit for them in marriage. Additionally, through Ruth's silence, Weldon exposes the power of silent thought in narrative as well as in the mind of an oppressed individual. Earlier mentioned marriage and family scholar Coontz notes on this, "for most of history the institutional norms of marriage required women to suffer in silence if their hopes for love inside marriage were thwarted and permitted men to seek love outside marriage" (9-10). We see this directly in Ruth's story, as she suffers in silence until the driving moment when Bobbo pushes her over the edge, which is what it takes for her to shift her life in the course of a more pro-woman, and less anti-feminist, direction.

An example of this comes early on in the story, when Ruth is describing her and Bobbo's relationship and living circumstances. She states, "It is a good life. Bobbo tells me so. He comes home less often, so does not say so as often as he did" (Weldon 4). She then asks these rhetorical questions about Bobbo's mistress, Mary Fisher: "Does Mary Fisher love my husband? Does she return his love? Does she look into his eyes, and speak to him without words?" (Weldon 4). In this moment, Weldon conveys the dramatic irony of Ruth's silence – her subordination to Bobbo, and her true feelings about his affair – which Ruth holds in, but allows the reader to see. By doing this, Weldon also directly employs Menippean satire per the characteristics Bakhtin defines, as the idea that Ruth would remain silent in this nature is seemingly absurd, and perhaps even frustrating,

to modern readers. It is an overarching part of the “extreme representation of ideology” that is the litany, and that harshly heightens the effects of just about every rule within it, especially the emotional effects imposed on the oppressed wife.

### The Emotional Satisfaction of the Good Wife

In addition to the expectation that Ruth will be silent regarding her grievances with her marriage, there are also rules within the litany that place heavy emotional restrictions on her, and are reflective of societal standards that insist women suppress emotions, or else risk being viewed as “crazy” or “overly-sentimental.” We see this right off the bat in rule one, which contends Ruth must “pretend to be happy when [she] is not” (Weldon 23). No matter the case, Ruth must not give off any inkling of emotion other than happiness, as it is best for her marriage that she controls her emotions in this manner. From this, along with the attached “for everyone’s sake” at the end of the rule and Ruth’s earlier mentioned education at the convent, we gather that Ruth has been taught to place the emotional satisfaction of others before her own. If she were to express any sense of jealousy, discontent, or other negative emotion, it would mean that she must be ungrateful for the marriage and life that Bobbo has given her. This is explored in an early moment in the novel in which Ruth discusses the common ways women in her neighborhood seem to settle for a similar level of complacency with their emotional dissatisfaction. In this moment, Ruth also makes a note of how women like herself tend to cope:

What I think is that other women up and down Eden Grover are better than I am at telling themselves lies. Their own husbands are away often enough. How

otherwise but by lies do they live, do they keep their self-esteem? Sometimes, of course, not even lies can protect them. They are found hanging in the garage, or cold and overdose in the marital bed. Love has killed them, murderous in its own throes, flailing and biting and poisonous.

And how, especially, do ugly women survive, those whom the world pities? The dogs, as they call us. I'll tell you; they live as I do, outfacing truth, hardening the skin against perpetual humiliation, until it's as tough and cold as a crocodile's. And we wait for old age to equalize all things. We make good old women. (Weldon 7)

In this passage, which arguably derives from Ruth's (and perhaps the other women on her street's) obedience of rule one of the litany, it is clear to see that Ruth truly believes the way her marriage functions is acceptable. She knows her unhappiness is present, but thinks it is not worth expressing. She sees this play out for the other women who live in their neighborhood of Eden Grove, and thus has come to accept that an unhappy relationship is the realistic expectation for her – one that she must be content with, or take the alternative of suicide. Ruth, however, admits to being stronger than some of these women because of her hardened persona brought on by years of being insulted and shamed for her physical appearance and demeanor. She recognizes, then, that this somewhat makes it easier for her to allow her marriage to function in the way that it does. As long as she follows the litany and performs her good wife responsibilities, she will continue to harden until one day, any sense of unhappiness she may feel will no longer bother her at all.

To an outsider, the way Ruth pushes down her true feelings about her marriage may seem ludicrous, but this notion that a woman's feelings comes second to those of a man is not entirely far fetched. In her discussion of a wife's role in marriage over the course of history, Coontz finds:

[...] institutions do structure people's expectations, hopes, and constraints. For thousands of years, husbands had the right to beat their wives. Few men probably meted out anything more than a slap. But the law upheld the authority of husbands to punish their wives physically and to exercise forcibly their "marital right" to sex, and that structured the relations between men and women in *all* marriages, even loving ones. (9)

Here, we can see that the history of marriage has shaped how society views the role of the wife versus the role of the husband, and it is clear that a general prioritization of the husband in all aspects has been the norm for quite some time. This is exactly what Weldon is working to point out via the absurdity of this rule of the litany, and in what ensues in Ruth's life during the periods where she truly felt this was what she needed to be doing as a wife.

Weldon reinforces this within rule seven of the litany, specifically in the part that states, "I must pretend in all matters to be less than he" (23). Again, there is the idea present within the ideology that Ruth must be subordinate to her husband, even in matters outside of just emotional satisfaction. While these rules Ruth follow seem wildly antiquated, especially in terms of Ruth's subordination of her feelings, it is all part of Weldon's satire. With these rules, Weldon fuels the Menippean critique she has made in

the novel in that they makes readers question “philosophical positions” regarding marriage and the role of the wife (Bahktin 95). Should it truly be necessary for Ruth to eternally sacrifice her own happiness in order for her marriage to work? We see this answered in her eventual transformation, in which she proves that prioritizing her own happiness can have a substantial effect on her wellbeing.

It appears that in this criticism of marriage’s emotional confines for wives, Weldon specifically invests herself in demonstrating to women the difference that putting themselves first in a marriage can have. When considering this, it is evident that Weldon’s satire is multi-faceted, and not entirely anti-feminist, as some argue. Not only does she wish to harshly critique these expectations within marriage, but additionally, she allows readers the takeaway of empowering notions about their role within their relationships. This directly supports Quintero’s earlier mentioned key trait of satire, which he notes is that it is written “not merely out of personal indignation, but with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest” (1). Certainly, Weldon has received backlash for the way that Ruth handles her marital issues following her realization that she need not obey the litany. Ruth becomes unstoppable in her path to her she-devil form, and is willing to take down anyone in that path, which includes women like Mary Fisher. Her revenge is a warped fantasy that is responsive to her extreme suppression, which is exactly the type of scenario found in Menippean texts. Weldon’s intention is pro-woman in nature largely because of Ruth’s empowering and epic evolution that is also attributable to her lack of sexual satisfaction within her marriage.

### The Good Wife's Sexual Satisfaction (Or Lack Thereof)

Perhaps one of the most critical areas explored within the rules of the litany is the sexual satisfaction of the good wife, and Weldon's implications through this that a man's sexual satisfaction is more highly valued than a woman's within a marriage. These rules – numbers six and seven specifically – are so critical in that they contribute largely to Ruth's unhappiness and her silent thoughts of hatred for Mary Fisher, which provokes her drastic physical transformation. To start, rule six states Ruth must “build up [her] husband's sexual confidence,” and must not dare to “express any sexual interest in other men, in private or in public,” though, conversely, these are things he is openly allowed to do (Weldon 23). This is indicated in the back half of the rule, which decrees Ruth must “ignore [Bobbo's] way of diminishing [her] by publically praising younger, prettier, and more successful women than [her,] and sleeping with them in private, if he can” (Weldon 23). What is interesting to this certain rule is the specific application of it to Ruth and Bobbo's relationship when considering its origins.

Following Ruth's leaving the convent she is educated at, she lives in a hostel where Bobbo's mother, Brenda meets her. Brenda develops a sense of sympathy for Ruth, and being that, at this point in time, Bobbo was away at school, suggests that Ruth live with her and Bobbo's father, Angus. During this time, Ruth sleeps in Bobbo's old room and helps around his parents' home as a form of gratitude for taking her in. At one point, Bobbo returns home from school and is at first annoyed by Ruth's presence, but quickly gets over it when she begins to allow him to sneak into her bed at night and have sex with her. Here, it is even noted that Bobbo “enjoyed Ruth's dependence upon him,”

which developed the more and more he gave her the attention she had yet to receive from another man (Weldon 29). Their intimacy, unfortunately for Bobbo's sake, leads to the accidental conception of their first child. The news of this along with a diagnosis of hepatitis and the news of his first love's engagement to another man puts Bobbo in quite a depressed state. Bobbo's mother and father insist that he marry Ruth given their circumstances, and when Bobbo reveals his discontent for this plan, his mother sows a seed in his mind for his eventual poor treatment of Ruth. She tells Bobbo: "one wife [is] much like another. The great advantage of Ruth [is] that she [is] *there*" (Weldon 30). In telling him this, Brenda, in many ways, encourages him to think of their marriage as one of convenience. By devaluing the marriage, and Ruth, in that respect, Bobbo is given justification for his later desires to sleep with other people. We see this in what he tells her following their marriage, when he states, "True love isn't possessive [...] not our kind of domestic, permanent love" (Weldon 31). Here, Bobbo directly indicates his feelings about marrying Ruth. From the start, he acknowledges their relationship as one of "domestic" obligation, in which she will satisfy his basic sexual needs, and what he cannot get from her, he is allowed to attain somewhere else. This is also something he implies she should be grateful for since he provides for her, and we see that easily reinforced in Ruth's low self-esteem and sense of complacency with what her life has come to.

From rule six of the litany, we can gather that Ruth's sexual satisfaction is intended to be valued as much less important than Bobbo's. Since he is providing her with a home, children, and her basic needs, and since it is commonly reinforced that she



should be so lucky to have these things at all considering her unattractive physical appearance, she supposedly does not deserve the same level of sexual freedom or general enjoyment as Bobbo does. Since their marriage is simply “domestic” to him, Bobbo is free to do as he pleases. Coontz discusses this notion of “domestic” marriage Bobbo believes he and Ruth have in her history of marriage, and finds men and women in relationships of this nature “describe their marital behavior, no matter how exemplary it may be, in terms of convenience, compulsion, or self-interest, rather than love or sentiment. In Cockney rhyming slang, the term for *wife* is *trouble and strife*” (18). Quite commonly, as Coontz proves, marriages in this state become more so about the satisfaction of one person, and tends to neglect the other person’s happiness and, or, needs, be they basic ones or as complex as sexual ones. It is expected that Ruth will be satisfied by Bobbo’s closed-eyed, monotonous sexual encounters with her, and nothing more, but Bobbo will need to explore outside of this to attain his own maximum, deserved levels of satisfaction. This is certainly a double standard, and one that Weldon employs as a form of irony as well as a means of provoking questioning of marital ideologies, which is inherently Menippean per Bakhtin’s defining characteristics that argue satire of this nature should invoke questions such as these.

Part of rule seven of the litany only furthers these notions regarding the lack of consideration for Ruth’s own sexual satisfaction within her marriage. This rule implies that Ruth must “render [Bobbo] moral support in all his undertakings, however immoral they may be, for the marriage’s sake” (Weldon 23). When thinking about the term immoral, it generally applies to things that distinctly go against traditional values of

society. Quite certainly, infidelity would classify as immoral to many, which is why the inclusion of this rule is another double standard Ruth faces that Weldon utilizes as an ironic tool in her satiric critique. Satire scholar John Synder theorizes in his study on tragedy and satire that Menippean satire specifically “excels in sustaining complex ironies,” which is something we see within Weldon’s writing through her application of these various instances of irony throughout the litany (Synder 139). It seems unfair that Ruth would be required to support Bobbo in his immoral acts when nothing similar is expected of him, especially when speaking directly about his sexual affairs, but that is what she believes she must do to be the good wife he supposedly deserves. Thankfully, for Ruth’s sake, we see this change as she enters her transformation and begins to explore her sexual desires and satisfaction without fear of ruining a marriage she is discontent in. During her transformation, Ruth even begins to toy with her newfound sexual freedom as a means of currency on her way to financial independence, as prior to that, she is wholly reliant on Bobbo for financial support.

### The Good Wife’s Finances

Under the restrictions of the litany, which, as evidenced, functions to parody the restrictions society places on wives a whole, Ruth has little to no ability to hold any financial power in her marriage. She must rely on Bobbo for total financial security and focus her time on homemaking, as doing anything else would ultimately mean being a bad wife. As Bahktin notes, Menippean satire possesses “topicality and publicity quality,” which is “in its way the ‘journalistic’ genre of antiquity, pointedly reacting to the ideological issues of the day” (97). Rules three and five of the litany both relate to

material wealth, which was publically praised in the materialistic 1980s, quite aptly, and indirectly comment on socially relevant issues of financial inequality between husbands and wives that are visible in 1980s British feminism's campaigns for workplace equality. Historically, marriage has held the implication that the male partner within the union was to be the "breadwinner," while the female partner was meant to maintain the household. This gendered economic trait is evidenced in the work of marriage and family scholars Mary Ann Lamanna and Agnes Riedmann. They note, "until fairly recently, a husband has been not only culturally, but legally, expected to be his family's principal breadwinner. Wives were culturally and legally bound to husband care, house care, and child care" (339). Because of this, "the husband exchanged breadwinning for the wife's homemaking skills and child rearing, and more general care and emotional support. Rewards of the provider role also included social status outside the family and greater authority in the family" (Lamanna and Riedmann 340). When applying this to Ruth and Bobbo's relationship, it is clear that Bobbo functions as the male breadwinner in the marriage, since Ruth is not employed outside the home. Even if Ruth could seek employment, though, it would be a direct disobedience to the litany, which, in the case of rules three and five, functions well to hinder Ruth's own financial success and keeps her in a domestic role of subservience to her husband, one in which she must constantly prove her gratitude despite his actions.

In rule three, Ruth is told she must "be grateful for the roof over [her] head and the food on [her] table, and spend [her] days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from [her] chair; for everyone's sake" (Weldon 23). The language

in this rule is brimming with gendered expectations that developed out of marriage's historic background, and enforces the widely accepted notion that men are to provide an income for their families, while women are to bear their children and cook and clean in the house. Essentially, Ruth is expected to be a homemaker, or housewife. Lamanna and Riedmann note on this concept, "An essential feature of the housewife role is constant availability to meet others' needs. Housewives report a lower sense of being in control of their lives than do employed women" (343). This is no different for Ruth. This rule she obeys to function as the good wife has her spending her days "cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from [her] chair," because doing anything else while Bobbo works would be a direct disservice to the proper function of her marriage and family (Weldon 23). What is interesting later in the plot, then, and what functions well as a largely pro-woman element of the narrative, is Ruth's financial evolution. This evolution includes starting her own business and drawing so much success from it, along with her other revenge endeavors, that she is able to purchase the High Tower. It takes breaking free from her marriage and the litany to do this, and that level of empowerment is far from anti-feminist.

In her marriage, however, much like the case of many other wives who abide by similar gendered expectations, Ruth's role as a homemaker reaps little to no economic reward. Without working, she cannot acquire her own continuous income, and must rely on Bobbo's income to suffice. This directly implies she has a responsibility to show gratitude. For Ruth, this implication of enforced gratitude means she must constantly aim to please Bobbo by placing his needs first and maintaining their home, so he does not

have to devote his own time to these things. This is commented on openly when Weldon writes, “This is the happiness, the completeness of domestic, suburban life. It is what we should be happy with: our destiny. Out of the gutter of wild desire onto the smooth lawns of married love” (Weldon 11). The juxtaposition of desire as “wild” and located in the “gutter” compared to the “smooth lawns” of suburbia found in marriage is rife with satire. This is Weldon’s way of “pointedly reacting to ideological issues of the day,” as is characteristic of Menippean satire (Bakhtin 97). For Ruth especially, the role of a housewife is pushed on her from a young age with her education in the convent. Everything in her childhood, and even in her early adulthood when she was cooking and cleaning for Bobbo’s parents, has led her to being one. It is no wonder, then, that she is so accepting of the role as her “destiny,” and works hard at it so as to be the all around good wife she has been taught that Bobbo deserves.

What only adds fuel to the fire of these financial restrictions placed on Ruth is the language in rule five of the litany, which is arguably an extension of Weldon’s reaction to ideological issues regarding financial inequalities in marriage from rule three. This rule leads Ruth to believe she must “consent to the principle that those who earn most outside the home deserve the most inside the home” (Weldon 23). When thinking back to Lamanna and Riedmann’s discussion of gendered roles within marriage, they make the statement: “Rewards of the provider role also included social status outside the family and greater authority in the family” (340). Per these standards for marriage, it is clear, then, that Bobbo expects to be rewarded by his wife for providing. This places Ruth quite directly in place of being beneath him, since she does not work. She cannot compete with

him for this role of the “provider,” and thus must come to accept what is, essentially, servitude and subordination to Bobbo as her fate. She must “consent” to inequality, and to many modern readers, this would come off as absurd. However, Weldon is foreshadowing the importance of economic power, which Ruth will eventually exploit.

Ruth’s complacency with this financial inequality and the rules relating to it manifests in the early chapters of the novel, particularly when she is preparing to entertain Bobbo’s parents for dinner. When Bobbo’s mother, Brenda, approaches their home, she peers in to get a look at the work Ruth has spent the day doing and give her approval of her skills as a “good wife.” In the narration of her observation, she notes, “the table was laid for four and the candles were in their sticks, the silver dishes polished and the sideboard dusted,” to which she “sighed her admiration” (Weldon 12). Later, as Brenda checks in on her son and notices how nicely his clothes have been ironed by Ruth, she exclaims, “She’s such a good wife [...] look at that ironing!” (Weldon 14). These menial household tasks Bobbo’s mother so graciously approves of are what fill Ruth’s days, alongside wondering about her husband’s infidelity and caring for their children. She is good at it, per Brenda’s mother’s confirmation, and it is what she believes she must do to show Bobbo her gratitude for his financial support. Bobbo reinforces this by never attempting to take on Ruth’s work, like household chores or the bulk of caring for their children, but also by spending days away at his apartment in the city with Mary, cheating, while still expecting Ruth to have a clean home and healthy children awaiting him solely because he gives her a roof over her head. It is certainly a

double standard, and one that Weldon uses as a tool to put a reader on Ruth's side as she begins her destructive path to revenge.

### The Outcome of Being a Good Wife

As we can see in Ruth's early actions in the plot as well as what background we are given of her and Bobbo's marital history, her life as his wife is far from ideal, which is what the litany implies it should be provided she abides by it. Yes, she is a good wife, but at what cost? She is brimming with contempt, hatred, and jealousy for a woman who lives a life free of the restrictions she herself is oppressed by – a woman who her husband actually loves. Mary Fisher has a level of power that Ruth has been made aware she does not possess herself, and she wants it. Ruth indicates this in a moment of her silent thoughts, in which she states:

And I will tell you this: I am jealous! I am jealous of every little, pretty woman who ever lived and looked up since the world began. I am, in fact, quite eaten up by jealousy, and a fine, lively, hungry emotion it is. But *why* should I care, you ask? Can't I just live in myself and forget that part of my life and be content? Don't I have a home, and a husband to pay the bills, and children to look after? Isn't that enough? "No!" is the answer. I want, I crave, I die to be a part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust. It isn't love I want; it is nothing so simple. What I want is power over the hearts and pockets of men. It is all the power we can have, down here in Eden Grove, in paradise, and even that is denied me. (Weldon 22)

In this moment, Ruth is on the cusp of defining the characteristics of her transformation, and all it takes is Bobbo's labeling her as a she-devil to ignite the spark she needs to fulfill these desires. Weldon here again employs that Menippean element of questioning ideologies to express Ruth's recognition of the inequalities in her relationship and a desire to change them. Ruth truly believes a life where she, as the woman, would have the power in the relationship is "erotic." This territory is one that is unknown to her, and the more she is exposed to Mary – unfortunately for Bobbo – the more she wants to explore it. Where feminist readers may question Weldon's intentions in this commentary is the line that expresses Ruth's desire to have "power over the hearts and pockets of men," which would imply that she wants superiority, rather than equality. Certainly, though, this is indicative of Weldon's effective use of satire, and intentionally gets a reader to think about the stark differences in the roles within a marriage and question it via outlandish statements such as this. Additionally through this, Weldon shows the anger and revolutionary force that oppression of wives creates.

Throughout the course of the litany, Weldon works to expose the double standards present in traditionally accepted responsibilities of wives. Ruth and Bobbo's marriage is one he considers out of obligation, and with that comes a specific level of return that he expects from her. Bobbo can explore sexually outside of their relationship, get out of maintaining his household or spending much time with his children, and can always still expect Ruth to perform her role as a good wife and maintain a positive mindset about the state of their marriage despite their majorly apparent issues. Eventually, this causes a rift between them that leads to Ruth's epic epiphany and



transformation. Weldon's application of satire via the parody of gendered expectations in the litany allows a reader to come to justify Ruth's seemingly absurd acts of vengeance for the life Bobbo subordinated her into. In an article discussing the labeling of Ruth's character as "freakish" as a tactic to "other" her, Shirley Peterson argues:

Ruth's response to Bobbo's cruelty illustrates the narrative project of [Weldon]. Her transformation from downtrodden suburban "angel in the house" into an avenging she-devil has its narrative equivalent in [the novel] which embrace[s] the freakish image in the interest of reconstructing form. Condemned by her husband Bobbo as a "she-devil" for refusing to accept their lie of a marriage, Ruth undergoes a strange evolution. As her mind immediately clears, she liberates her desire from the restraining manacles encoded in the Litany of the Good Wife. (293)

As Peterson contends, Ruth's stepping away from her marriage with Bobbo is a huge power move in dismantling the litany. In taking her narrative in this direction, Weldon's novel functions to empower other scorned women via satiric fiction, and also encourages readers to question the historic ideologies attached to the concept of marriage that we have carried into the present century.

What is ironic in terms of the litany that Ruth so closely follows prior to her transformation is the lack of anything similar for the husband. Never during the course of the novel do we see a "Litany of the Good Husband," with rules regarding how to emotionally satisfy one's wife, how to keep a family happy and functioning financially, or how to maintain sexual loyalty to one's wife. Again, Weldon here plays into the

Menippean notions of absurdity and questioning ideologies, and drives readers to feel Ruth's pain and see the injustices within the imbalances in marital roles. This notion of a lack of a litany for the husband, as well as what, then, is expected of the husband, is what chapter two of this thesis will go on to explore. Certainly, it appears that Weldon is again adding to her satiric commentary by using this one-sided setup, and there are indications of this that play out in Ruth's acts of revenge.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Bad Husband

Within her social commentary on marriage, Weldon looks largely at the gendered expectations that are imposed on wives and single women alike. One of her biggest tools in doing this is the litany, but another is the point of comparison that Bobbo provides as Ruth's husband. The term "husband" has a history of assigning more power and freedom to the male component of a married couple. This is evident in Bobbo's character, as we see that he has free reign and few, if any, established standards for behavior other than what society and those around him, like his mother and father, have taught him is acceptable. Unfortunately for Ruth, this means that Bobbo is really only expected to provide for her financially and be a part-time parent to their children. Compared to all that Ruth does for their family, Bobbo, then, is arguably a satirical example of a bad husband, and one who gets away with being bad because those around him do not see him as so. This satiric approach adds much to a pro-woman reading of Weldon's text, as it is certainly quite uplifting for the feminist reader to eventually see Ruth evolve out of her forced complacency with Bobbo's behavior. Throughout the course of their marriage, Bobbo has spent the majority of the time having affairs whilst insulting Ruth's physical appearance and personality, and attributing his behavior, essentially, to the fact that they are only married out of obligation. There is a blatant contrast between their actions within their marriage, especially when considering their overall satisfaction with the status of it. To a modern reader, the stark inconsistency between these two's roles is obvious, and

functions as for Weldon as a bleak indictment of the institution of marriage that utilizes the Menippean genre to convey her critique.

As has been noted, Weldon's novel fits the what Bakhtin has identified as characteristic of the Menippean genre of satire for various reasons, but the predominately applicable one in the case of the drastic differences between Ruth and Bobbo argues writings of this nature will contain "violations of the generally accepted, ordinary course of events and of the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including the verbal" (96). Certainly, Bobbo's behavior in regards to his marriage fits these characteristics. His infidelity violates the common marital vow and "generally accepted" behavior within marriages of today, while his "behavior and etiquette" also goes against what is expected of what should function opposite of the good wife – the good husband. While Bobbo's behavior is arguably bad in the realm of the novel's context, it is also representative of contemporary Western society's tolerance of bad male behavior as a whole and the double standards based in patriarchal traditions that make room for actions like his. Bobbo functions as an element of commentary from Weldon on the issue with the direct imbalance between how society views husbands versus how they view wives. While wives are held to a specific standard, which Weldon provides input on via the "Litany of the Good Wife," it appears that there is an obvious lack in similar standards for husbands.

The Missing "Litany of the Good Husband"

When examining the role of the husband in terms of a modern definition, Bobbo seemingly has his bases covered. In his marriage to Ruth, she and Bobbo both function to fulfill a role in what sociologist Jane Hood identifies as a "main/secondary provider

couple,” which Lamanna and Riedmann define as a form of domestic partnership where “providing is the man’s responsibility; the home is the woman’s” (339). Since Bobbo works, puts a roof over his family’s head, and provides them with their other basic needs for survival, it would appear that he is doing his job as a husband sufficiently within the guidelines of a main/secondary provider couple. In meeting these basic qualifications, Bobbo then functions as a “good provider,” whose role “exchange[s] breadwinning for the wife’s homemaking skills and child rearing,” and is thus rewarded with “social status outside the family and greater authority in the family” (Lamanna and Riedmann 340). Essentially, as the sole breadwinner in their relationship, Bobbo gains much more authority and esteem than Ruth, solely because she brings no financial support to the table. He is meeting his requirements by providing financially. This puts Ruth directly in a position of inequality to Bobbo, and, in his mind, makes room for his bad behavior.

In conveying Bobbo’s character in this way, Weldon brings to light the drastically gendered inequalities that can occur within a marriage, which society often reinforces via anti-feminist rhetoric like that of Mary Fisher’s romance novels. Bobbo does not live up to the clichéd knight-in-shining-armor archetype that romance novels so commonly give men in their pursuits of wives. Instead, he is uncaring, irresponsible, and misogynistic, and this manifests in his actions. To the modern reader, Bobbo’s lack of genuine participation in his marriage and family seems somewhat absurd, and even weak, especially considering the supposed growth that has been made in terms of gender equality and the definition of marriage. Weldon accentuates this point through Bobbo. He is essentially absent from his marriage and from being a father, and even fails to have a

solid relationship with his own parents, while within the litany, Ruth is expected to behave the opposite in each case. Fitting of Menippean satire then, Weldon toys with the idea of Ruth needing to be a good wife when compared to her husband, whose only apparent duty is to bring home money. The contrast between the two is crucial to Weldon's critique of marriage as a whole, as Quintero argues, "satire cannot function without a standard against which readers can compare its subject" (3). For Weldon's novel, Ruth's litany serves as a set of absurd standards to measure up to what society historically has identified as the roles for wives. Via the litany, she calls out society for imposing such high standards for wives, and then, in turn, calls out the lack of similar standards for husbands with the absence of a "Litany of the Good Husband."

Since Weldon does provide this point of comparison between Ruth and Bobbo, it is critical to the analysis of her satiric purpose in writing the novel to analyze Bobbo's performance as a husband. When looking at the contrast between the amounts of work that Ruth puts into their relationship as opposed to what Bobbo puts in, it is arguable that even though he meets basic standards for providing, when it comes down to equality between partners, he is a bad husband. Essentially, he is not a reliable or trustworthy partner to Ruth because of his actions that are driven by his insensitive and self-centered nature. He admits to being married to her out of obligation and promises to do right by her, yet treats her with little to no mutual respect. All the while, Ruth must measure up to standards for silencing her opinions, her emotional behavior, her sexual behavior, and her financial status in order to be a good wife, while Bobbo seemingly does not have to worry about things of this nature. He is free to voice or withhold his opinions as he

desires, express his emotions openly, explore sexually, and control all finances for the family solely because he is the one working. In the following sections, then, I will explore Bobbo's behavior in these categories when compared to Ruth's, and thus demonstrate further why he functions in Weldon's critique to point out the double standards in marital relationships like that of the commonly accepted main/secondary provider couple.

### The Bad Husband's Selective Silence

According to the litany, there are rules that imply a good wife is to remain silent about her feelings and opinions in order to make the lives of her family, especially her husband, easier. As was explored in chapter one of this thesis, this sense of silence that is inflicted on the good wife comes out of historic notions of what marriage implies is the wife's role. Without a "Litany of the Good Husband," it is presumable that Weldon is provoking the notion that these absurd rules the good wife must follow do not apply to husbands, which is evident in Bobbo's behavior throughout the course of the novel. Since he fulfills the role of providing, he seemingly receives a free pass on everything, which includes silence. He is allowed to be selective in what he speaks up about and what he remains quiet about, and does so to his advantage in multiple instances, without care for how it will affect his family or his wife.

One of the very first instances of Bobbo's selective silence comes when Ruth is preparing for his parents to visit for dinner. Ruth, upon reflecting on Bobbo's affair and noticing more and more his direct disinterest in her, has been crying as she does the last minute preparations. He takes the step to ask why, to which she lies and notes that she

bumped her head. In this lie, Ruth demonstrates her obedience to the litany. She would rather bottle up her emotions regarding Bobbo's actions than share how she feels because she believes it is best for everyone that she does so. In this moment, Bobbo chooses to remain quiet as well, but for quite a different reason. The narrator notes, "He accepted the lie because his parents would be there any minute, and he had, besides, very little interest any more in what his wife said or did, or why she cried. He forgot Ruth and wondered, as these days he often did, what exactly was the relationship between Mary Fisher and Garcia, her manservant" (Weldon 17). Here, rather than communicate to address the issue, Bobbo conveys quite directly his lack of interest in his marriage in its entirety. Instead of considering his wife's emotional reaction and speaking up to fix it, he thinks about his mistress and his jealousy of the men around her, which is itself ironic on another level. The moments he chooses to be silent are selfish, and not to benefit his family or Ruth in any way.

This poor communication between Ruth and Bobbo is something that marriage and family psychologist Dr. John Gottman notes as a key component to marriage failure. In a chapter of his book, *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*, Gottman stresses the importance of effective communication, and finds, "it seems to make sense that calmly and lovingly listening to each other's perspective" in the instance of a conflict "would lead couples to find compromise solutions and regain their marital composure" (9). This is something Bobbo and Ruth clearly fail to do, but for Ruth, this is consequential of her obedience to the litany and her attempts to be what society deems a "good wife." She has been encouraged to think that as long as she is quiet and obedient to



the other rules, her marriage will succeed. For Bobbo, these communication issues all tie back to his original disinterest with marrying Ruth in the first place, which ultimately set their relationship up for failure. What is ironic about his selective silence, then, is that had he spoken up from the start, he could have been in a much different situation in terms of his relationship status.

As we learn the origins of Bobbo and Ruth's marriage in the early chapters of the novel, we also learn of his reluctance to marry her and his one-sided decision to keep their marriage open. To further this already arguably problematic decision, Bobbo also demands that Ruth allow him to share the details of his affairs with her, which, to him, adds to his enjoyment of them. He tells her specifically in the case of his affair with Mary Fisher: "Ruth [...] you're my friend; you must wish me well, in this. Life is so short. Don't begrudge me this experience, this love. I won't leave you; you musn't worry, you don't deserve to be left; you are the mother of my children: be patient, it will pass. If it hurts you, I'm sorry. But let me share it with you at least" (Weldon 34). Again in this instance, Bobbo is permitted to be selective with his silence. Though he could choose to conceal the fact that he married Ruth out of obligation, or that he chooses to have extramarital affairs, he desires to be forthright with the information. While it could be viewed as admirable that he admits to these things, it is fairly selfish of him to not consider the implications this has on his relationship with his wife or the lives of his children. He demands that Ruth not "begrudge" his relationship with Mary, yet as is indicated in one of the rules of the "Litany of the Good Wife," Ruth is not allowed to have experience of a similar nature for herself. Within this double standard of Bobbo's

selective silence, there is that element of attack that fuels Menippean satire in that his actions “provoke and test” the ideals for being a good husband that society has come to accept (Bakhtin 94). This provocation is a strong element of social critique, which we also see in how Bobbo communicates directly with Ruth.

In addition to being selective in his silence regarding his feelings about their marriage and what he is allowed to do within in, Bobbo also directly opposes the rule of Ruth’s litany that states she must “make no adverse commentary on the nature of [her] existence” (Weldon 23). This rule implies that though Ruth may feel that her role as a wife is not up to par with her expectations, she is not to express that, but rather, should be grateful to have married at all. Since he functions as the point of comparison in Weldon’s satire here, Bobbo then does exactly the opposite of this rule in most cases by openly criticizing Ruth, and is seemingly allowed to solely because he is the husband. This is again evident in the moments before dinner with Bobbo’s parents, as Bobbo questions Ruth’s cooking skills in a condescending manner. He asks Ruth questions like, “Can’t you even keep the dog out of the soup?” as if it is her tendency to allow this to happen (Weldon 37). When Ruth gets teary-eyed and defensive from his comments, he demeans her emotional response by telling her, “Don’t be so silly, Ruth. It isn’t a disaster,” and “You’re tired. [...] You must be tired, or you wouldn’t talk such nonsense” (Weldon 37). Here, Bobbo’s commentary on Ruth’s actions comes as a form of criticism, which Gottman notes as a component to his “Four Horsemen” in recognizing a failing marriage. Gottman defines the difference between complaints between spouses and direct criticism, and finds, “A complaint only addresses the specific action at which your spouse failed. A

criticism is more global – it adds on some negative words about your mate’s character or personality” (27). Again, Bobbo is allowed to make critical comments of this nature because he is the husband, and to a modern reader, it is an absurd hypocrisy, and directly indicative of why their marriage fails. Fortunately, Weldon takes her satire in the Menippean direction by having Ruth break free from this bad husband and finding her own ways to be selective as Bobbo is in her silence, which works to her favor in her eventual transformation.

#### The Bad Husband’s Emotions

Bobbo also receives a pass on emotional expression that Ruth does not get. In Ruth’s litany, multiple rules imply she must not express any emotions aside from happiness, and must be grateful for the cards she has been dealt with Bobbo. Since there is no litany for Bobbo to abide by, there is nothing in place to mute his emotional range in a similar manner. Bobbo is seemingly immune to the rigid restrictions that Ruth must follow, and he lives to enforce her restrictions through his actions and misogynistic tendencies. When considering this, Bobbo fits well into the categorization of a figurative king that is derived from Bakhtin’s notions of the carnival crowning and discrowning. With much of the marriage’s power in his hands – here the emotional power especially – he is wearing the crown. It will take Ruth’s total evolution to discrown him, and this will be largely emotional. This form of a carnivalesque satiric callout from Weldon regarding emotional differences between a husband and wife ultimately feeds quite well off of additional marriage and family psychology concepts discussed by Gottman.

Early on in his aforementioned book, Gottman argues that one of the key components to a healthy couple's success in staying together involves both partners having a strong sense of emotional intelligence. He states: "The more emotionally intelligent a couple – the better able they are to understand, honor, and respect each other and their marriage – the more likely that they will indeed live happily ever after" (Gottman 3-4). When applying Gottman's claims to Weldon's novel, it is evident that Bobbo and Ruth's relationship lacks this sense of emotional intelligence. For Ruth, this stems from her desire to meet societal standards for being a good wife and a woman in general. For Bobbo, this is much deeper, and rooted in his reliance on Ruth being more submissive to his feelings than her own. As the figurative king, he holds the power – which he is aware of – and needs to maintain it. As long as he is king, Ruth will have trouble questioning his authority. This adds to Weldon's satire in that it helps to point out the absurd element of contrast between the gendered expectations in marriages. Her commentary of this nature can be seen exhibited throughout multiple scenes of the novel.

As Ruth prepares for the dinner with Bobbo's parents, there are chapters narrated from her perspective which reveal her feelings that she bottles up, versus what she expresses to Bobbo. In one moment as she is expressing her feelings about Bobbo's mistress, her narration states, "I hope the tower burns and Mary Fisher with it, sending the smell of burning flesh out over the waves. I would go and fire the place myself, but I don't drive" (Weldon 10). Rather than reveal her dark anger and hatred for Bobbo's actions by expressing her discontent with the situation though, Ruth remains loyal to her

litany and stays quiet. She reflects on this herself in a way when she recalls a discussion with Bobbo where he noticed she was upset about his affair. The scene reads:

“Be patient,” he says, “I don’t intend to leave you. It’s just that I’m in love with her and must act accordingly.” Love, he says! Love! Bobbo talks a lot about love. Mary Fisher writes about nothing but love. All you need is love. Mary Fisher loves Bobbo because I am married to him. Good women love their husbands. But love, compared to hate, is a pallid emotion. Fidgety and troublesome, and making for misery. (Weldon 10)

Here, Weldon foreshadows Ruth’s discrowning of Bobbo and directly expresses her actual feelings about his actions and his mistress via her narration, but does not follow through in having Ruth voice these feelings to anyone but the reader. Ironically here, Bobbo is blatantly outspoken about his love and desires surrounding his mistress. He makes no effort to keep this from Ruth, and in this, employs no sign of emotional intelligence. In this, he shows that he is a bad husband and simply acts without consideration of the implications, which conveys Weldon’s commentary on the inconsistencies between what is emotionally acceptable of husbands and wives.

When Ruth is later more visibly upset about Mary Fisher as she is putting the finishing touches on dinner, the narration provides important insight as to how Bobbo feels about her emotions and where he lies in terms of emotional satisfaction with their relationship. Contrary to her inability to express her emotions at the risk of upsetting the balance of the family, Bobbo sees no issue with doing exactly the opposite. This is conveyed in the narrative with statements during this scene such as, “His wife seemed to

him to be immeasurably large, and to have grown larger since he told her of his love of Mary Fisher. He asked her if she was putting on weight, and she said no, and stood on the scales to prove it,” and “Bobbo put on a record. He thought it might drown the sound of his wife’s crying. [...] He wished she would not weep. What did she expect of him? He had never claimed to love her. Or had he? He could hardly remember” (Weldon 18). Here, Bobbo chooses to disregard his wife’s feelings, and even openly expresses that he does not even know if he loves her. As the king in the relationship, he is not bound as she is to the confines of complacency, and can clearly quite freely express his levels of emotional satisfaction and dissatisfaction, which only incenses Ruth’s inner fire more and makes his life worse later on. In having Ruth bottle her emotions in this way while Bobbo’s run much more liberally, Weldon suppresses Ruth to get her ready for what Bahktin describes in his characteristics of the Menippea as, “the most daring and unfettered fantasies and adventures” which are “internally motivated, justified, and illuminated here by a purely ideological and philosophical end – to create *extraordinary situations* in which to provoke and test a philosophical idea” (94). Bobbo’s actions as a bad husband who focuses solely on his own emotional satisfaction rather than that of his family’s are the key to provoking Ruth’s transformation and his discrowning, which becomes highly motivated by a desire to turn the litany on its head and embody a she-devil.

Alongside his sexual and financial satisfaction, Bobbo’s own emotional satisfaction is something he values much more than Ruth’s. As the novel evolves, this becomes something that Ruth realizes and uses as motivation in her evolution. Bobbo

demonstrates his devaluation of her feelings by engaging in actions like gaslighting and contempt, which Gottman argues are some of the most obvious signs a marriage has gone sour. Gottman notes that most marriages start off on a high note, with a sense of friendship between the partners that helps them to work through things together. Over time, however, this can change, as “anger, irritation, and resentment can build up to the point that friendship becomes more and more of an abstraction” and this can cause the couple to resort to “*negative sentiment override*,” in which “everything gets interpreted more and more negatively” (Gottman 21). Already then, Bobbo and Ruth’s relationship began under incorrect pretenses, and was arguably doomed from the start in terms of emotional satisfaction on both sides. They did not have that element of friendship, and seemingly, this is indicated in Bobbo’s mentioned early affairs and frequent reminders that their marriage is one of convenience. We see this aspect of negative sentiment override then play out in moments like their explosive fight during the dinner with Bobbo’s parents, when Bobbo exclaims, “See how I have to live!” and “It’s always like this. My wife creates havoc and destruction all around: she destroys everyone’s happiness!” (Weldon 40). Here, Ruth responds with: “Why won’t you love me?” (Weldon 40). In this instance, Bobbo blames Ruth directly for their relationship issues. Since he has no litany to hold him back from expressing how he feels, he does so in front of everyone present at the dinner with no remorse. Ruth takes this as a criticism, and attempts to address Bobbo’s inability to love her the way she expects him to, since surely, as a good wife, she deserves that much. By conveying these drastically different levels of emotional satisfaction between Bobbo and Ruth, especially in terms of their varying

abilities to express that, Weldon provokes readers into questioning the inequalities between spouses and fuels readers with a desire to take Ruth's side as she transforms. This notion of getting readers on Ruth's side aids in Weldon's pro-woman rhetoric, since the goal for Ruth is conveyed as self-empowerment through breaking away from the gendered restrictions that oppress her, like the emotional ones discussed here.

#### The Bad Husband's Sex Life

Another way in which Bobbo functions as a satiric point of comparison for Ruth is the case of his sexual satisfaction versus hers. As seen in Ruth's litany, she is responsible, as a good wife, for building up Bobbo's sexual confidence, never looking at or being intimate with other men, and supporting him in all of his actions, even if that means allowing him to have multiple affairs. Bobbo again has no similar criteria as the husband. He can demean Ruth constantly by commenting on her physical appearance and homemaking skills, bringing around and discussing his lovers, and still expect intimacy from her on days when he cannot be with his mistress. Surely, these things would be far from confidence-building for Ruth, and there is a blatantly ironic double standard in the fact that Bobbo can have affairs, but Ruth cannot. The litany insists that if Ruth were to do any of the things Bobbo does on a near daily basis in their relationship, she would be putting her family at risk. While Ruth notes it is best "for everyone's sake" if she remains faithful, Bobbo's infidelity stands out as what is worst (Weldon 23). In this absurd comparison, Weldon again toys with the marked inconsistencies between acceptable behavior and actions from wives versus husbands. The unstated "Litany of The Bad



Husband” is here implied and provides indirect satiric commentary on age-old gendered stereotypes surrounding infidelity.

Lamanna and Riedmann provide much useful context regarding extramarital affairs that is applicable to Ruth and Bobbo’s situation as well as the satiric commentary Weldon makes with it. More particularly, they provide specific information on the gendered differences relating to infidelity:

Then too, gendered differences are evident in any discussion of extramarital sex (Harris 2003a). More husbands (about 23 percent according to one national survey) than wives (about 12 percent) have had an affair sometime during their marriage (Wiederman 1997). If a wife has an affair, she is more likely to do so because she feels emotionally distanced by her husband. Men who have affairs are far more likely to do so for the sexual excitement and variety they hope to find (Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny 1994, pp. 494, 499). Then too, “Men feel more betrayed by their wives having sex with someone else; women feel more betrayed by their husbands being emotionally involved with someone else” (Glass 1998, p.35). (Lamanna and Riedmann 226)

When applying this information to the case of Bobbo and Ruth, it is highly evident that they function well to meet the statistics for extramarital affairs. In Bobbo’s case, he indicates quite frequently that his affairs while he is with Ruth are because their marriage is out of obligation, and he desires outside excitement. In the instance of Mary Fisher especially, Bobbo actually claims to be in love, which leads to Ruth feeling betrayed by both their emotional and sexual connections. In constructing their narrative in this way,

Weldon points out the drastically different expectations for marital fidelity, and conveys why Bobbo, and perhaps other men who act in a similar manner, falls more along the lines of being a bad husband than what society has historically allowed to be deemed acceptable, or “good.” This too can be seen illustrated in multiple situations throughout the buildup to Bobbo and Ruth’s separation as Weldon constructs that sense of justification for Ruth’s she-devil actions that come later on. For Ruth, her intimate relations with other people come during her separation from Bobbo, which fits the feeling of emotional distance justification and helps lead to her discrowning Bobbo.

As an accountant, Bobbo views intimacy with a monetary perspective, which is rooted in his career in finance, but also a concept that is present in researched marriage and family psychology. Weldon sets up his scale through third person narration as follows:

A monetary scale for lovemaking, Bobbo thought, would have to set the sum of earning-capacity-wasted plus energy-consumed against the balance of pleasure-gained plus renewed-creativity. A cabinet minister’s coitus, however feeble, could work out at some \$200, a housewife’s entr’acte, however energetic, a mere \$25. An act of love with Mary Fisher, a higher earner and energetic with it, would be worth \$500. An act of love with his wife would be graded at \$75, but of course occurred more often so unfortunately would yield a diminishing return. The more often sex with a particular person happened, Bobbo believed, the less it was worth. (Weldon 15)

Bobbo's debatably problematic perspective of intimacy evidenced here is something Lamanna and Riedmann denote as "exchange theory," which argues "people use their resources rationally to bargain and secure advantages in relationships," and that "people are inherently interested in maximizing their rewards or pleasures and minimizing their costs or pain," with a related idea being: "the more often or easily a person experiences some pleasure, the less valuable it becomes" (226). As we see in Bobbo's scale for lovemaking, he values relations with Mary Fisher at a much higher rate than what he assigns his wife, and even admits to believing that the value of intimacy with Ruth diminishes over time because of how easily accessible it is. When reading this from a feminist perspective, it seems a direct insult to both women – Ruth and Mary Fisher alike – to be valued monetarily for nothing more than their intimacy. In providing this perspective from Bobbo, then, Weldon calls out the stark difference commonly found in a man's view of intimacy with his wife versus a woman's with her husband. Bobbo justifies his cheating by devaluing his wife, and Ruth is not allowed to do something of a similar manner because of her desire to please him. This works to draw a reader to questioning the ideology behind gendered marital standards, and further encourages the taking of Ruth's side when approaching the couple's issues and viewing Bobbo as a prime example of a bad husband – one who deserves this discrowning he receives.

Bobbo's hyper masculine views of intimacy lead to most of his relationship issues with Ruth, and have origins rooted deeply in gendered standards for marriage, but also in his own obsession with financial security and sexual power. This is ironic in that he somewhat then is the cause of his own destruction solely because he chooses to

continuously value himself higher than the women around him. When Weldon reveals the backstory behind Bobbo and Ruth's relationship, she conveys quite clearly that Bobbo's initial desires with Ruth were purely sexual and originated out of a desire for revenge on another lover. This is exhibited when Weldon provides Bobbo's insight by writing: "He liked [Ruth]. She never laughed at him or despised his sexual performance, as did Audrey Singer, the girl whom Bobbo currently loved. Bobbo felt that his seduction of Ruth, this vast, obliging mountain, served Audrey right" (Weldon 28). For Bobbo, this Audrey Singer is a catalyst for his initial intimacy with Ruth. She does not think as highly of Bobbo as he sees himself, and it drives him to seek out validation elsewhere. Lamanna and Riedmann label this as a "conquest affair," in which a partner is seeking to "get revenge for a spouse's real or imagined injustices" (227). While Bobbo was not married to Audrey, he was admittedly in love with her, and used her sexual dissatisfaction with him as a justification to using Ruth for revenge. While he used Ruth to rebuild his sexual confidence, his self-image became further inflated, and thus he justified his need to seek sexual intimacy outside of his marriage when Ruth could no longer provide him with everything he desired. Societal standards encouraged this by enforcing the notion that, as the sole breadwinner, Bobbo was more deserving of control in these matters. In structuring Bobbo's narrative in this way, Weldon effectively employs satire to point out that though Bobbo does provide for his family, his infidelity is preposterous, and quite unfairly justified by gendered stereotypes. Bobbo receives much more of a pass than Ruth, and this contributes greatly to her eventual destruction, discrowning, and emasculation of him.

### The Bad Husband's Finances

Perhaps one of the biggest areas in question in regards to Bobbo's standing as a good or bad husband is his financial status. As is mentioned earlier on in this chapter, in Weldon's characterizing Bobbo as she does in terms of financial matters, he fulfills what is deemed the "good provider role." He gives Ruth financial support, and in turn, expects to be allowed to behave as he does, almost as if "good provider" becomes synonymous with "good husband." Ruth's acceptance of this is not entirely uncalled for when considering her education and societal expectations for herself as a wife. She has been consistently told that she must make a man happy, and she believes in following her litany of rules to do so, which includes these financial restrictions. Per Ruth's litany, a good wife is "grateful for the roof over [her] head and the food on [her] table," and must demonstrate this every day by "cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from [her] chair; for everyone's sake" (Weldon 23). She also must "consent to the principle that those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home; for everyone's sake" (Weldon 23). For Bobbo, this means that as long as he provides that roof over Ruth's head and continues to earn more than her, he has the freedom to do as he pleases and to control the household. Despite progress from the feminist movement for equality, this seemingly antiquated notion is something we still see present in modern society, which is arguably what Weldon is working to satirize in this case.

Societal pressures push Ruth into thinking she deserves less as a non-wage-earning partner in the marriage, but this directly devalues the other work she does at home. Lamanna and Riedmann comment on this notion of an unequal share of

responsibility by stating: “husbands are likely to be receiving higher salaries than are their wives even within an occupational grouping. Men invest relatively more time in the labor force. As a result, husbands are likely to have more status and power in marriages and can therefore resist housework demands” (356). It is clear this is the case of Bobbo and Ruth’s marriage, as this imbalance of power and responsibility leads to dissatisfaction. There is a distinct absence of a shared sense of care from both partners regarding their household and the functioning of their family, and for Ruth, this becomes something that fuels a buildup of anger over time and eventually feeds much of her transformation. Weldon here indirectly comments on the consequences of inequalities of this nature by taking a more extreme route, which is critical to Menippean satire. To see this more clearly, it is crucial to look at Bobbo’s views of the situation as Weldon conveys them throughout early moments in the narrative.

What is interesting in Bobbo’s story is that from a young age, he has considerably awful financial role models who come to shape his narrative as an adult. Weldon reveals that his parents often had issues with money, and would fluctuate between socioeconomic levels frequently due to their poor spending and investing habits. When Bobbo gets Ruth pregnant, his mother insists they get married, to which his father replies, “A boy like Bobbo needs to marry wisely, with an eye to money and connections” (Weldon 29). In this, Bobbo’s father ironically hints that Bobbo should take on a marriage where he may not be the sole provider, which we see occur later on when Bobbo finds love in Mary Fisher. So, Weldon shows Bobbo as a kind of babyish man who cannot take charge anyway. With Ruth, though, Bobbo functions to work against this notion, especially since

he did not genuinely desire to marry her in the first place. He gets to be that element of an “eye to money and connections” for her, and thus gets to have the higher level of power he needs to be able to have affairs frequently and, essentially, ignore the fact that he had to marry her (Weldon 29). In this, Weldon again utilizes the idea of selectivity for Bobbo. His desire to be equal or lesser than a woman is situational and dependent, seemingly, on their sexual prowess and physical beauty. Since, to him, Ruth offers neither, he can behave as badly as he wants, have total control, and blame it on his role as the provider.

Even when Bobbo makes the decision to live separately from Ruth and move in with Mary Fisher, he still surprisingly attempts to be Ruth’s provider and control her decisions despite her newfound awareness that he is a bad husband. He tells her as he is packing to leave, “I’ll send money back... You won’t really be able to tell the difference whether I’m here or not. You take little or no notice of me when I am here, and of the children none at all” (Weldon 46). Ruth, appalled at his statements, voices her concerns regarding what the outside world will think of it all. She replies with: “The neighbors will be able to tell... They’ll speak to me even less than they do now. They believe misfortune is catching” (Weldon 46). Ironically, Bobbo here blames their situation on her, replying with: “This is not misfortune, exactly... Merely the consequences of your actions” (Weldon 46). Here, Weldon directly demonstrates both characters’ inept capabilities of functioning within a marriage, especially in terms of how they agree on financial matters. For Ruth, it is her constant desire to please society and be the good wife of her litany that destroys her ability to see herself as anything but subordinate to a man. She comes to believe she needs Bobbo for the status he provides, primarily being the socioeconomic

normalcies of the picturesque house in a quiet suburb, where they raise two children comfortably to an outsider, yet live in distinct disharmony in reality. For Bobbo, as the king with the crown, he sees his wife as a homemaker and nothing more, and values himself above her because she 1) allows him to do so, and 2) abides by gendered stereotypes that insist he deserves more control in all matters. The reality of their situation is arguably ludicrous and highly filled with hypocrisy and irony, which drives questioning of gendered financial ideologies within marriage.

#### The Outcomes of Being a Bad Husband

By conveying Bobbo in this controlling manner throughout the novel, Weldon demonstrates multiple reasons as to why he is a bad husband, and calls out the stark contrast in marital roles using satire as her key tool. In multiple instances, Weldon points out Bobbo's belief that his providing for his family out of obligation justifies his affairs and poor treatment of his wife, and thus criticizes society's encouragement of the acceptance of this behavior. What is good for Ruth's narrative and eventual crowning, then, is that Bobbo's actions and behaviors as a bad husband become the framework for her evolution. Essentially, the outcome of being a bad husband is his discrowning.

In their pivotal fight following the dinner with Bobbo's parents, Bobbo labels Ruth a "she-devil," and provokes the epic transformation in Ruth that functions as a "representation of man's unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states," which is Bakhtin notes, is characteristic of Menippean satire (96). This change is quite directly consequential of Bobbo's treatment of her, and as we see in the novel, results poorly for him because her transformation means taking on elements of his bad behavior as a way of



flipping the gendered expectations that she has abided by on their head. Ruth feels exonerated in her realization of Bobbo's perspective of her, and expresses this in her narration by stating: "But this is wonderful! This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only, in the end, what you *want*. And I can take what I want. I am the she-devil!" (Weldon 43). No longer will she allow the concept of being a good wife to cloud her desires in the world, but rather, she will throw these notions out the window and move forward with solely herself in mind. Bobbo, in absenting himself emotionally and physically from Ruth's life, is not necessarily anything other than a provider. It takes this realization for Ruth to understand that she does not have to follow her litany, and from that, she grows into her evolutionary period, which is further marked by the discrowning of Bobbo, more social commentary from Weldon regarding equality of the roles within a marriage, and the final crowning of Ruth as queen.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Evolved Woman

The comparison of the good wife to the bad husband serves as the major motif for the remainder of Weldon's Menippean satire of marital roles, which comes in the form of Ruth's transformation into the evolved woman, also known as the she-devil. Ruth makes the decision to evolve in order to avenge her loss of Bobbo to his mistress, Mary Fisher, but in the course of doing so, takes on an eccentric new persona that attacks societal standards for women from the root, in both a mental and physical sense. At her evolution's completion, Ruth has successfully discrowned Bobbo and taken the power and the crown for herself. This transformation is marked by empowering actions that support a largely pro-woman reading of the novel as a whole. This chapter, then, will work to convey this satiric approach with Ruth's evolution and how it stems out of her desire to move away from her litany and towards a position of radical empowerment. To do so, it is first necessary to contextualize the moment that marks the beginning of Ruth's journey to her true she-devil form and the taking of the figurative crown.

#### Contextualizing the She-Devil's Evolution

With their marital drama now out in the open, Bobbo makes the decision to leave Ruth. This choice is made essentially so that he may further pursue his relationship with Mary Fisher while Ruth learns to "behave better," as he puts it (Weldon 44). Ultimately, in doing so, Bobbo seals his unfortunate fate in the novel by formally dubbing Ruth with her "she-devil" title in the moments before he leaves. In his peak moment of outrage with

Ruth for revealing his affair to his parents, Bobbo exclaims: “I see you at last as you really are. You are a third-rate person. You are a bad mother, a worse wife, and a dreadful cook. In fact, I don’t think you’re a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil!” (Weldon 42). The third person narrator then notes in this moment there is a “change in the texture of [Ruth’s] silence from the other side of the door” which she is hiding behind, and that Bobbo “thought perhaps he had shocked her into submission and apology” (Weldon 42). This change in texture is palpable in Ruth’s narrative commentary from this moment on, and as is evident in her evolution, Bobbo’s thought about having shocked her into submission once more is quite incorrect.

When Bobbo labels Ruth a “she-devil,” instead of being “shocked into submission and apology,” she is actually incensed with anger and begins to come to many realizations regarding her marriage and desired status as a good wife. However, this recognition does not come right away. At first, almost as if tying back to her good wife roots, she notes: “I thought I was a good wife tried temporarily and understandably beyond endurance, but no. He says I am a she-devil,” and she then ultimately supposes Bobbo must be right since “he does so well in the world and [she does] so badly” (Weldon 43). Even in her initial response to Bobbo’s actions, Ruth still holds his opinion above hers. Ruth’s subservience is a conditioned response, which Lauren Berlant notes stems from “what identifying with fantasies of conventionality can do for women amid the project of surviving a world that can wear you out” (233). Soon after this, though, Ruth is already beginning her evolution, as she proclaims: “But this is wonderful! This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no

shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only, in the end, what you *want*. And I can take what I want. I am a she-devil!” (Weldon 43). Ruth has an epiphany, in which she realizes that perhaps being a good wife does not always reward accordingly, especially in the case of being married to a man like Bobbo. From this moment on, Ruth seeks what she deems deserving of her inner she-devil: revenge, power, money, and “to be loved and not love in return” (Weldon 43). Essentially, she embarks on her iconoclastic journey from the scorned wife to the evolved woman in her ultimate she-devil form.

This evolution of Ruth’s character is one that heavily ironic in that she is both justified and completely out of bounds in her behaviors. Griffin defines satiric irony by stating: “irony should be understood not simply as a binary switch, either “on” or “off,” but more like a rheostat, a rhetorical dimmer switch that allows for a continuous range of effects between “I almost mean what I say” and “I mean the opposite of what I say”” (65-66). This is quite accurately how Weldon employs satiric irony within her own novel. Throughout Ruth’s journey from the good wife to true she-devil, Weldon utilizes ironic plot elements that invoke questioning of both the roles within marriage and their implications on those who fill them. From the critical reception of the novel, it is clear that the varying interpretations of Weldon’s satire and feminism throughout Ruth’s story evidence the aspect of employing a rhetorical dimmer switch between female empowerment and vindictive acts of revenge to keep readers engaged and inquiring about their own values in contrast to hers.

With the use of this satiric irony as well as a few key traits Bakhtin identifies as critical to the Menippean style, Weldon greatly adds to her overarching implementation of subversive satire with Ruth's transformation and crowning. Her evolution as a whole aligns with what Bakhtin identifies as the "most important characteristic of the Menippea," which reads: "the most daring and unfettered fantasies and adventures are internally motivated, justified and illuminated [...] by a purely ideological and philosophical end – to create *extraordinary situations* in which to provoke and test philosophical ideas" (94). For Ruth, this provocation and testing of philosophical ideas that stems from her storyline (especially her delving into physical transformations) functions as a key component to Weldon's social commentary on marital roles as well as societal perceptions of women as a whole. To add to this, Ruth's psychological and eventually physical transformation also meets Bakhtin's Menippean criteria of "unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states – insanity of all sorts ("maniac themes"), split personalities, unrestrained daydreaming, [and] unusual daydreams" (96). Certainly, her drastic shift from the good wife to the she-devil is representative of a more abnormal moral state. Ruth's transformation comes to be justified by Weldon via the built-up sexist actions of Bobbo, which Weldon conveys throughout the beginning of the novel and in flashbacks. Ruth is bent on outdoing Bobbo, and in discrowning him, will do so in a way that feels more pro-woman than anti-feminist. In her newly discovered she-devil state, Ruth engages in "eccentric behavior" that violates "the generally accepted, ordinary course of events and the established norms of behavior and etiquette, including the verbal" (Bakhtin 96). For example, Ruth engages in risqué and immoral sex, practices

unethical business, and undergoes bodily mutilation via intensely invasive cosmetic procedures that she gets in order to physically resemble Mary Fisher. She goes against the expectations of a good wife, and instead, becomes something quite far from that in the end, which is arguably a goal of Weldon's in utilizing this Menippean mode.

In addition to greatly fueling Weldon's ironic purpose in writing the novel, Ruth's transformation also specifically functions more directly as a relatable story of defiance and empowerment for female readers. However, some critics have pressed the idea that Weldon's novel is anti-feminist in nature, like Bouson Brooks, who argues Ruth simply "yields to the pressure to conform when she transforms bodily into the idealized Mary Fisher" (143). Within this perspective, there is the notion that Ruth's transformation is less of a bold choice by Weldon and more of an act of giving into societal expectations for the physically desirable traits of women. This reading interprets the novel as anti-feminist especially in that Ruth sets out to both embody male fantasy and destroy the woman she despises for destroying her marriage, instead of seeking to simply better herself and move on, or solely go after the man at fault. Debatably, though, Brooks is missing the point of the satire. Those societal expectations and justifiable feelings of revenge are precisely what Weldon works to point out in having Ruth undergo her transformation, which is one that still also allows Ruth to move on from her marriage issues in her own, more self-propelled way. Structuring Ruth's plot in this way is a distinctive method of commenting on societal expectations for women and wives, which the aforementioned Berlant argues is largely Weldon's aim. She notes, "*She-Devil* speaks critically of women's relation to love, locating it within the political economy of feminine

suffering shaped by global and patriarchalized regimes of intimacy and labor” (245). Weldon portrays Ruth as oppressed by patriarchal thinking, which drives her insane. However, Weldon also provides readers, particularly female ones, with a story that features a strong female lead working to overcome the restrictions that generations of the patriarchy have come to enforce upon women. As Sarah Aguiar notes in her own discussion of Weldon’s text, “Readers, in relating to the appearance of the negative Witch/Medium archetype, might expect no less than all the evil an aging havoc-wreaking harpy can conjure up” (105). Yes, Ruth comes to conform to beauty standards by using radical cosmetic surgery to evolve into her own version of Mary Fisher, but when considering the aftermath of her transformation alongside the satiric purpose of the novel as a whole, it is evident that Weldon is not purposely working against feminist aims, but rather provoking readers to question how they define feminism.

#### The Evolved Woman’s (Rightful) Lack of a Litany

There is no specific “Litany of the Evolved Woman” to compare to the “Litany of the Good Wife,” which Ruth originally abides by. Arguably, this is Weldon’s way of commenting on the notion that, outside of being a “good wife,” there seemingly are vastly different expectations for a woman – expectations that are, quite clearly, undefined. This is because, like the women in Ruth’s suburb of Eden Grove, the often only acceptable goal in life for a woman in the context of this novel, though also quite commonly in the reality of society, is to become a wife. This is something we also see in Ruth’s education, which distinctly taught her how to be a wife and care for a home, rather than providing her with the same education a male student would receive. What is

important in the case of the missing “Litany of the Evolved Woman,” though, is how Ruth’s transformation into the she-devil comes to define what it means to be something other than a wife, and demonstrates how different her life is once she turns away from societal expectations for women that have held her in an unfulfilling marriage for so long.

As Ruth is taking on this new persona, her narration and actions consistently come to mark the ways she turns away from her following of the old litany and shapes a new one for herself. This is something that both Aguiar and Berlant comment on about the novel. Aguiar discusses Ruth’s transformation as one that involves breaking away from “social limitations of femininity.” She argues for a female character to do this, she must make “the choice, either consciously or subconsciously, to reject the traditional roles open to her and to possess power, a power that is always predisposed to have been usurped from the male sphere” (Aguiar 98). Indeed in the case of Ruth’s transformation, this is what we see transpire. Ruth rejects the implications that she should be quiet as a wife, and also the emotional, sexual, and financial restrictions of being one, Berlant furthers this notion by stating: “For Ruth, this is a theoretical, practical, and sexual transformation into the negative. The homeopathy of self-inflicted pain derived from the incineration of her memory (the memory of desires) numbs the general pain of failure at competence to femininity” (248). As Berlant’s implies, the idea is that Ruth is driven by her wish to rid herself of her past desires of being a “good wife” and to, instead, transform into what is typically deemed negative by society – a woman not defined by her marital role. Since Ruth turns so drastically away from her first litany and becomes more of a symbol for what a woman can be outside of an unbalanced marriage, it is



useful to analyze her evolution and journey to her crowning as a negation of the original litany. This negative response consists of parallel but opposing categories, which include 1) lack of silence, 2) emotional satisfaction, 3) sexual satisfaction, and 4) financial independence.

### The Evolved Woman's Lack of Silence

When thinking back to the “Litany of the Good Wife,” there are multiple implications throughout that a married woman should be silent and passive. She is to withhold her opinions and “make no adverse comment on the manner of [her] existence,” with each rule relating to her silence being “for everyone’s sake” (Weldon 23).

Fundamentally, then, wives are to be seen and not heard, and are expected to maintain a constant sense of fake happiness so as to not disturb the balance of their family. As is noted in the second chapter of this thesis, no similar burden falls on husbands, which is something that Ruth comes to realize during her evolution into the she-devil. As Mara Reisman notes on this: “What is certain is that Ruth’s realization that the patient, the good, and the virtuous do not always triumph in the end is a challenge to the romantic rules of engagement that keep women passive and dependent” (657). In granting Ruth this realization, Weldon engages in an act of social critique on the role of a wife and what contemporary Western society has come to paint that to be.

As Ruth takes in this realization and begins to transform, she starts to display the element of selective silence that Bobbo so frequently employs throughout their marriage. No longer does Ruth have to remain complacent in a state of silence that benefits everyone. Instead, Ruth uses silence as a powerful tool with which she can selectively

choose to reveal certain things, like her true identity or her revenge plans, to her benefit. She can choose to be more selfish, like Bobbo, and in doing so, empowers herself. Weldon has Ruth go through various instances in which she can now, as an evolved woman rather than simply a good wife, break the stereotype of the wife and make the choice to speak up about her feelings. Arguably, Ruth and Bobbo face extraordinary situations characteristic of the *Menippea* that no average couple would necessarily encounter, but these exaggerated scenarios are quite representative of the satiric nature of the novel as a whole.

Technically, the beginning of Ruth's breaking her vow of silence as the "good wife" comes during the dinner with Bobbo's parents, when she suddenly and without warning reveals his affair with Mary Fisher to his parents and provokes his earlier discussed outburst. This one act of speaking up essentially has a domino effect that plays well into Ruth's evolution. We see this take effect even just after Bobbo makes the decision to leave her and their children. As the children sit eating with Ruth, she mutters something under her breath about what has transpired. This purposely indiscernible comment is a habitual action tied to her recently broken state of silence, but when asked by her daughter to clarify what she said, Ruth quite bluntly states: "Dumped. [...] That's what happens to the plain and the virtuous. They get dumped" (Weldon 47). Here, rather than keep the realities of the situation with Bobbo a secret from the children, Ruth is much more direct than she would have been if still acting as a "good wife." She provides that element of "adverse commentary on the manner of [her] existence" (Weldon 23)

with her statements about being plain and virtuous, and throws caution about the sake of everyone else's feelings to the wind.

In a later moment involving their children, Ruth again demonstrates her newfound ability to utilize her voice as she sees fit. In this case, she makes the radical decision to take the children to live with Mary Fisher and Bobbo in the High Tower after she has destroyed their home in Eden Grove. Symbolically, this burning of their marital home is the first major moment in Ruth's transformation. She has begun her plans to discrown Bobbo, and will not stop until everything is in place. When Ruth brings her children to the High Tower, Mary Fisher and Bobbo are indecent and intimately engaging in sexual intercourse. Mary Fisher's manservant, Garcia, allows Ruth to intrude on them with the children alongside her, to which Bobbo replies, "Take the children out of here [...] This is no place for them" (Weldon 70). Instead of silently obeying like the "good wife" she used to be, though, Ruth remains in the room with the children while Bobbo and his mistress are forced to quickly make themselves decent. She then tells the children: "you are in a very wonderful and interesting place. It is a converted lighthouse. That is why there are so many stairs. And this is a very famous, very rich lady, who writes books. Her name is Mrs. Fisher and your father loves her very much, and you must love her too, for his sake" (Weldon 71). This moment is quite powerful for Ruth's character, especially given her behavior with Bobbo earlier on in the novel and in the flashbacks Weldon provides. Instead of shielding the children from their father's infidelity and trying to maintain the balance of their emotions all on her own, Ruth instead lays everything on the table. She also removes the chance for Bobbo to sway the situation in his favor by

speaking up first. In this response, Weldon additionally includes a tie-in to the original “Litany of the Good Wife” by having Ruth’s revelation to the children include the words “for his sake.” By wording it in this manner, Weldon provides indirect commentary on the notion that, despite there being less strict expectations for husbands, their opinions and wellbeing seem to actually be the only ones that matter. Essentially, nothing Ruth would do as a “good wife” would actually be “for everyone’s sake,” but rather, for the sake of only Bobbo’s satisfaction with their marriage.

As she continues to evolve, Ruth also greatly applies her selective silence in the course of enacting her revenge on Bobbo and Mary Fisher. More specifically, Ruth takes on multiple fake identities and proceeds to outsmart and manipulate people in order to ultimately wreak havoc on those who have wronged her. At Mary Fisher’s mother’s nursing home, Ruth disguises herself and becomes a woman “from the north, recently widowed, and with experience in care of the elderly” (Weldon 84). Following her success in getting Ruth’s mother banned from the nursing home (by making her incontinent) and forced to live in the High Tower, Ruth moves on to acquiring fake degrees so that she can work in a local prison while taking bookkeeping classes to learn how to embezzle Bobbo’s client’s money, frame him, and land him in prison himself. This time, she is “Vesta Rose,” a woman with “experience abroad in the caring professions” (Weldon 111). Under this alias, she later starts a company that she uses to plant the seed for Bobbo’s arrest. To then complete her takedown of Bobbo, Ruth moves on to working as a maid named “Polly Patch” for the judge who will sentence his case. Ironically, the judge is a sadomasochist, who has spent years forcing his wife into sexual situations that lead to

her injury. Ruth, rough and hardened by her past with Bobbo, ultimately offers herself as a saving grace for the judge's wife, as her sexual engagements with him save his wife from having to feign enjoyment via her desire to be a good wife to him. This is yet another pro-woman element of the novel, and one that is albeit overlooked in current criticism. There is good in Ruth's actions, it just takes an open perspective and a different theoretical lens to see that.

By this point, Ruth has acquired much money from her scheming and takes on her physical transformation with medical professionals under the name of "Georgiana Tilling." Since she needs to lose weight for her surgeries, she spends time working with a priest named Father Ferguson, during which time she is "Molly Wishant." Her final fake identity is "Marlene Hunter," who cosmetic surgeons transform into Ruth's final form as the she-devil. In each of these cases, Ruth is able to acquire what she wants by toying with the notion of silence. She stays quiet about the reality of her identity so as not to be traced in her acts of revenge, and as Brooks notes in his criticism about the novel, she "take[s] advantage of her invisibility" (141). The identities Ruth takes on empower her to take what she wants, when she wants, and in doing this, Weldon demonstrates how women who find their voice seemingly know no bounds compared to those who are stuck trying to be society's version of a good wife.

As an evolved woman in her she-devil form, Ruth does not have to be silent if she does not wish to, and we see this play out in how she enacts her revenge on Bobbo and Mary Fisher. This ability to be selective about how and when she voices her opinions is

certainly one advantage in straying from the good wife path, which is what a reader can take away from Ruth's evolution and path to her figurative crowning as a whole.

### The Evolved Woman's Emotional Freedom

Fortunately for Ruth, her evolution also means a turn away from the emotional prison that has become her marriage. As an evolved woman, she can engage with her emotions, experience what that feels like, and actually act on them, which we see play out in the course of her revenge. By structuring Ruth's narrative in this manner, Weldon employs scenes rife with "sharp contrasts" that are fitting of a Menippean work of satire (Bahktin 95-97). Arguably, in this specific case of the emotional satisfaction of a woman, Weldon does this in order to convey the extreme sides of what such restrictions like that of the "Litany of the Good Wife" can do to a woman who abides by it. Ruth's breakaway from this emotional oppression is as empowering as it is transformative.

Even in just the beginning of the novel, Ruth is already laying the groundwork for her emotional freedom. She indicates through her narration that she is full of hatred for Mary Fisher, and that she resents the state of her marriage to Bobbo. After Bobbo leaves her, though, it is almost as if the barrier from her litany is officially broken, and Ruth can thus begin her evolution and start to act on her genuine feelings. Here, the crown is passed to Ruth, which is evident in a line from her narration, which comes as she is discussing Mary Fisher's unfortunate trust in Bobbo when she allows him to move into the High Tower with her. Ruth notes: "It is dangerous to love men, to put your trust in love" (Weldon 66). Here, Ruth is ultimately reflecting on her own experiences with Bobbo and how in living with him as his wife, she put herself in danger by only living to

fulfill his desires instead of her own. In this moment, Ruth for once allows herself to act on an emotion other than complacency, and this is quite a drastic, yet admirable, contrast from the Ruth she was before.

A similar sort of emotional growth and expression to this is seen soon after Bobbo moves in with Mary Fisher, in an instance where Ruth finally allows herself to reflect on an emotion surrounding Bobbo's affair that is not the standard jealousy or anger. She tells herself:

But I need a little time. Soon I will mend but now I am hurt. The she-devil is wounded: she has slunk back into her lair: the ogre motherhood paces outside with heavy feet.

I must think of this grief as a physical pain. I must remember that just as a broken leg heals with time so with this psychic injury. There will be no disfiguring scar tissue: this is an inner wound, not an outer one. (Weldon 77)

Here, in a sharp change from her usual psychic state, displaying elements of Menippean satire, Ruth no longer tells herself that what Bobbo has done to their marriage is acceptable. Instead, she allows herself to feel grief and disappointment for what has occurred, which helps in her evolution in that she takes time to first process the more painful notions, and then move on to act on them accordingly.

As Ruth continues to evolve and engage in her various acts of revenge against Bobbo and Mary Fisher, she begins to circle back to feelings of happiness, though this time, they are legitimate instead of fake, and also more motivated by fulfilling her own needs. Ruth becomes empowered and thrilled by her newfound sense of self, and when

she realizes how her plans are coming to work out, she revels in it. We see this following Ruth's gratification of her goal to make Mary's life in the High Tower miserable. Ruth places Mary in charge of her and Bobbo's children, their pets, and Mary's senile mother, and this very quickly causes Bobbo to withdraw from their relationship and Mary to feel stressed and inadequate. On this successful turning of the tables, Ruth notes:

Mary Fisher must renounce love, but cannot. And since she cannot, Mary Fisher must be like everyone else. She must take her destined place between the past and the future, limping between the old generation and the new: she cannot escape. She nearly did: almost, she became her own creation.

But I stopped her. I, the she-devil, the creation of her lover, my husband. And she needn't think I'll stop there. I've only just begun. (Weldon 109)

No longer is Ruth the emotionally scorned woman, but instead, she has successfully pushed Mary Fisher into replacing her in that role. This sharp contrast makes Ruth feel content and empowered, while leaving Mary arguably trapped. In doing this, Ruth takes direct revenge on who she feels contributed to her own previous entrapment, and allows herself to for once feel emotional satisfaction driven by her own desires. Though some argue this attack on Mary is anti-feminist in nature and encouraging of female rivalry, I would move to say that her actions here are justifiable, especially considering the change she makes at a personal level via breaking free of her sources of oppression. Her path to revenge is a means for Weldon to provoke questioning about female expectations via a satiric approach. Additionally, her actions still have negative consequences for herself, which is something we see her recognize near the end of the novel.



After Ruth has successfully modified her body, and taken Bobbo, who she has emasculated and discrowned, back from Mary, all the while exploring her driving emotions like hatred, rage, and frustration through her other various acts of revenge, she ultimately comes to realize that she has not won anything in ruining the life of Mary Fisher alongside Bobbo. In the penultimate moment of her crowning, as Ruth looks out over the landscape of the High Tower she has come to possess, she states:

I will look out, as Mary Fisher looked out from her bedroom window, sitting up after a night of love with her Bobbo – my Bobbo – to where the new morning sun glances over hills and valleys and trees, and know, as she did, that it is beautiful, and make this my acknowledgement of her, my grief for her, all that I have to give to her. She is a woman: she made the landscape better. She-devils can make nothing better, except themselves. In the end, she wins. (Weldon 231)

With this specific contrast, Weldon utilizes irony to demonstrate how Ruth could not win because in the end, her desires to escape the emotional restrictions within the “Litany of the Good Wife” were selfish, rather than for the benefit of women as a whole. She is not necessarily an example of what women should do to escape the emotional monotony of being a good wife, but instead, she is still a victim of the patriarchy, and thus a model of the consequences of allowing oneself to remain hindered by a husband’s emotional desires for so long. Ruth states that Mary Fisher wins, and in many ways, she is right. This is something Aguiar argues in her own writing on the novel’s ending, stating: “[...] for all that [Ruth] has gained, she has lost the positive attributes commonly associated with the female. [...] Once her quest has been completed, she is nothing” (107). Yes,

Ruth gets the satisfaction of ruining Bobbo's life for the price of what he put her through; but her realization that, in the end, she got nothing from taking down Mary Fisher as well is something that aptly refutes claims that Weldon's writing about women's emotions is anti-feminist. Ruth's acknowledgment of her actions against Ruth demonstrates a level of personal growth that she would not necessarily have obtained had she not let her transformation run its course. In this realization, she makes the distinction that in that moment, she is not the most pro-woman feminist out in the world, but she can work to better that, which, as is revealed in the sequel, she does by running a feminist-leaning organization for several years.

Throughout Ruth's emotional journey, one thing is quite clear: when she allows herself to step away from the litany and genuinely process as well as act on emotions aside from complacency, she is a considerably different, less selfish woman. She actually helps people, like the judge's wife, when she acts unselfishly, which is something that Bobbo and Mary Fisher never seem to do. Certainly, at first, this is displayed in her eccentric acts of revenge against both Bobbo and Mary Fisher, which function as catalysts for Weldon's social commentary on wives' emotions. Throughout this part of Ruth's evolution, she is seemingly more empowered than any portion of the novel. As critic Patricia Juliana Smith argues, Ruth during this period seems to "allegorize the adage that 'living well is the best revenge'" (86). In the end, though, Ruth is able to realize that though she may physically embody Mary Fisher and live in her home, she will never have the emotional freedom that Mary was granted by not having to ever abide by the restrictions of the litany. This is a key moment where Weldon employs satiric

irony in the novel, and a ways by which she provokes questioning from the reader regarding what it means to be an emotionally empowered woman.

### The Evolved Woman's Sexual Prowess

In addition to the newfound senses of emotional freedom and the ability to use her voice as she sees fit, Ruth in her evolving form also gains much in the area of sexual satisfaction when not working to abide by the "Litany of the Good Wife." When revisiting this, there is a rule that implies Ruth, as a "good wife," must "build up [her] husband's sexual confidence" and "not express any sexual interest in other men, in private or in public" (Weldon 23). Additionally, this rule requires Ruth to "ignore [Bobbo's] way of diminishing [her] by publicly praising younger, prettier, and more successful women than [her,] and sleeping with them in private" (Weldon 23).

This rule is rampant with double standards, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis, and implies that Ruth's sexual satisfaction as a "good wife" is primarily dependent upon her husband's desires, rather than what she actually wants. With this rule in place, Bobbo is allowed to explore sexually and still use Ruth for his fulfillment when he sees fit, but Ruth could never do the same, because it would risk her family's happiness. Once Ruth begins to work at embodying the title of "she-devil," though, consideration for this rule disappears. As an evolved woman, Ruth is not bound by the sexual limitations of the litany, and can use her sexual exploits as a tool in getting what she wants. By having Ruth do this, Weldon utilizes scenes of eccentric behavior fitting of Menippean satire to convey the injustice in sexual expectations for men versus women, and how empowering it can be for a woman to be able to have the same sexual liberties as a man.

The first sexually related exploit Ruth takes on following her separation from Bobbo comes in her trip to Eden Grove's neighborhood caretaker. Carver, the caretaker, is a man who was "reputed to have suffered brain damage," who "sometimes exposed himself" to the women in the suburb (Weldon 52). Despite his reputation, the narrator remarks that many people in the neighborhood often visited Carver for sexual purposes, stating: "Good, suburban wives, neatly dressed and properly washed, seeking something beyond degradation so that it approached mysticism, tri-trotting into his shed. Men and women, in unsanctioned and temporary love, leaping and wriggling through the rivers of time" (54). When Ruth pays her visit to Carver, though, it is less about gaining a sexual experience outside of Bobbo, but more so about what she states is "the breaking of the first rule," which she tells Carver is "discrimination" (Weldon 54). Ruth is the only person of all who have visited Carver that he cannot get aroused for, and in this moment, Ruth is able to identify the groundwork for her evolution. The narrator notes on this: "She and this writhing senior citizen had between them constructed a crisscross base on which the new foundations of her life would stand, as upholstery upon its webbing. The webs were pain and pleasure, humiliation and exultation, transfiguration and degradation, properly accepted: the construction would take amazing weight, amazing strains" (Weldon 55). In this scene of unconventional behavior on both Ruth and Carver's part, Weldon both lays the foundation for Ruth's sexual exploration throughout the course of her evolution, but also makes satiric commentary on the commonality of suburban wives who seek sexual gratification outside of their monotonous lives abiding by the litany.

After Ruth's experience with Carver, the next sexual encounter she has is with a married man named Geoffrey Tufton, who is staying in the same Travelodge as Ruth. Upon meeting in the bar of the hotel, Ruth assists Geoffrey with his severe case of conjunctivitis. They then begin to sleep together, and during this time, Geoffrey pays Ruth's hotel bill in return for her help with his eye as well as her company in bed. Ruth's time with Geoffrey is especially critical to the conversation regarding her sexual evolution in that Geoffrey is depicted as being fairly similar to Bobbo in terms of his infidelity. At the same time though, his justification for his affairs is quite different. For instance, Weldon describes Ruth and Geoffrey's experiences together as follows:

[Ruth] liked to have the light out, and to be beneath the covers, and he was not averse to this. He and his wife had started their married life this way, until his wife had started reading the higher-quality women's magazines and decided that sex, nudity, and physical imperfection were nothing to be ashamed of. It was, he had felt at the time, an unfairly unilateral decision, but he said nothing. His wife had a good body – he hadn't. His wife had also, under the influence, he felt, of the same magazines, developed a liking for oral sex and odd positions, which embarrassed him. Ruth liked simply to lie beneath him, which was perhaps just as well. She told him that her husband had complained of her unadventurousness, but what could she do? (Weldon 82)

In this description, a distinct contrast is made between Bobbo and Geoffrey. In Bobbo's case, his affairs are driven by his lack of desire to be married to Ruth in the first place alongside his affinity for women who look nothing like Ruth. For Geoffrey, his affairs are

driven by his inability to please his wife's own newfound desires to be more adventurous in the bedroom, which is ironic in that this is something Ruth is now also able to explore more freely herself. Unfortunately, Ruth's experience with Carver and the comment regarding Geoffrey's wife's figure teaches her that she cannot fully evolve in terms of her sexuality until she has a certain physical appearance and confidence level. Until then, she must use sex as a means of getting what she wants, which we see in her use of Geoffrey's financial resources to maintain a roof over her head. When Ruth leaves Geoffrey, the narrator remarks that she rises "healed from her bed" (Weldon 84), seemingly implying that her knowledge of this aforementioned notion of using sex as a power play will function as a major tool in her evolution.

Once Ruth learns of the power sex can have in playing a role in her acts of revenge, she begins to utilize it as she sees fit, even with women. Previously mentioned critic Patricia Juliana Smith argues on this notion:

While never central figures, Weldon's lesbian characters invariably play crucial and provocative roles, providing her put-upon heterosexual protagonists with foils, role models, experimental sexual encounters, or objects upon which to focus their all-pervading anxieties. And while lesbianism does not necessarily provide solutions to the heroines' dilemmas, it indicates the existence of modes of sexual, social, or even economic viability other than institutional heterosexuality – which, in Weldon's case, never seems overly felicitous – as well as modes of interaction between women other than shrewish rivalry. (79)

In the case of Ruth, we see this play out in her sexual exploits with Nurse Hopkins, who she befriends and rooms with while working Lucas Hill. During their time as roommates, Ruth convinces Nurse Hopkins to move their beds together, and from there on, “there was much cuddling, kissing, and sexual experimentation between the two women” (Weldon 119). This sexual activity between the two women makes them much closer, and allows Ruth to gain an edge up by creating a distinct bond between them. Their newfound bond then makes it easy for Ruth to convince Nurse Hopkins to hand over her savings so they may start a secretarial agency that Ruth later uses as a tool in taking down Bobbo. As is indicated by Smith, this is a situation in which one of Weldon’s heroines explores outside the realm of her typical heterosexual marital institution, and does so for the sake of economic viability. Again, Weldon here implies that Ruth has come to recognize the power sex holds, and in doing so, uses it to her advantage.

Arguably one of the most crucial exploits in which Ruth utilizes sex as a tool in her revenge comes when she begins to work for Judge Bissop, who, as noted earlier, is presiding over Bobbo’s embezzling case that Ruth secretly concocted after starting the agency with Nurse Hopkins. This is one of her last times using sex as a major power play, as after this instance, she endures various cosmetic surgeries to transform into a more physically acceptable suitor for sex for pleasure’s sake. The Judge, like Geoffrey and Bobbo, is a married man. Unlike those two, though, he is also a self-proclaimed sadomasochist who often imposes his violent sexual habits on his wife without her consent, which she has become complacent with because like the old Ruth, she believes it is her duty as a good wife. In this instance, there is the question of why Ruth would not

rather help Lady Bissop than be her husband's mistress, but when considering what the Judge puts Lady Bissop through, it is almost as if Ruth's sexual services do ultimately benefit her by providing her with a break from fulfilling what she believes are her wifely duties. Additionally, by being a mistress to the Judge, Ruth achieves what she needs for her revenge via use of her sexual prowess. She has come to realize the power sex can have, and once she completes her physical transformation and secures Bobbo's place in prison, she becomes somewhat unstoppable as the she-devil.

By the end of the novel, Ruth's sexual evolution is seemingly complete, and she remarks that she lets both Garcia, Mary Fisher's former manservant, and Bobbo, who is now senile, sleep with her when she sees fit. She even sometimes takes other random lovers in front of Bobbo, exclaiming, "What agreeable turmoil that causes in the household!" (Weldon 241). She notes even when she has completed her evolution that sex is still merely political, and more of a means of humiliating Bobbo whenever she sees fit. When considering both this behavior in her fully evolved form alongside the behavior that leads up to it, Ruth acts in an arguably unconventional manner that is akin to the mode of Menippean satire in that she represents the manner of sharp change that can occur in a woman who is freed of her oppressors. By presenting Ruth's character's development in this way, Weldon is able to point out the ironic double standards for sexual exploration that exist between wives and husbands, especially when considering the fact that a majority of the people Ruth slept with were married men. Ruth grows significantly when she breaks free from the confines of the sexual rules of the litany, and



this comes to demonstrate the true power sexual prowess can hold, especially when it is something a woman is using as a tool against men.

### The Evolved Woman's Financial Come-Up

One of the final areas that that Ruth evolves greatly in during the course of her transformation to the she-devil is her financial status. She gains a level of sexual confidence that demonstrates to her the power sex can have as currency, and this leads to a major financial come-up. Prior to her evolution, Ruth abides by the litany's implications that she must acknowledge that because Bobbo earns more outside the home, he deserves more inside it, and therefore she must "be grateful for the roof over her [her] head and the food on [her] table, and spend [her] days showing it, by cleaning and cooking and jumping up and down from [her] chair" (Weldon 23). Essentially, she is limited to a life of being a housewife, while Bobbo has the freedom to do as he pleases financially and control their family's expenses. Before their separation, Ruth has literally no means of income. She does not work, and tells Bobbo this as he leaves, since she is concerned about how she will provide for the children. He tells her he will send a small amount of money for the sake of the children, but also harshly adds: "there is always work for those who want it" (Weldon 48). It takes Ruth's realizing that she must pave her way to financial freedom for her to start her evolution on this part, and in doing so, Weldon provides satiric contrast to the socioeconomic confinements that marriage often places on women who desire to fit the role of the good wife.

In these moments after Bobbo leaves Ruth with the notions that she must get a job, care for their house and children essentially on her own, and accept his moving on to

Mary Fisher and all her financial glory, Ruth makes a statement that largely sparks the beginning of her own financial journey from scorned single mother to High Tower-dwelling she-devil. This statement is as follows: “In the end I sucked the energy out of the earth. I went into the garden and turned the soil with a fork, and power moved into my toes and up my stubborn calves and rested in my she-devil loins: an urge and an irritation. It said there must now be an end to waiting: the time for action has come” (Weldon 51). In these words are Ruth’s realization that in order for her to move forward, she must utilize the “urge and irritation” in her she-devil loins and take action regarding her situation. This is the spark of her scheming and what leads to her first major financial move, which as has been mentioned is burning down her family home so that Bobbo cannot take it from her and the children will be forced upon him and Mary Fisher.

Once Ruth is free of the burden of caring for her household or her and Bobbo’s children, it becomes much easier for her to build her way up financially, especially in that she harnesses her aforementioned sexual power as the catalyst for most of her major financial gains. By sleeping with Geoffrey, she gains free housing for a short term until she seeks employment at Mary Fisher’s mother’s nursing home. During her time at the nursing home, Ruth acquires the information necessary to make her next moves, which ultimately leads her to Nurse Hopkins. While working with, and sleeping with, Nurse Hopkins, Ruth lays the groundwork for her major embezzlement scheme to get back at Bobbo. She takes classes on secretarial work and bookkeeping, and then convinces Nurse Hopkins to leave their workplace together and start their secretarial agency. Through this agency, Ruth is able to gain access to Bobbo’s workplace and slowly toy with his clients’

numbers to make it look as if he has been stealing bits of their money and hiding it in offshore accounts. Seemingly as Ruth grows in the previously discussed aspects (finding her voice, her emotional satisfaction, and her sexual satisfaction), she also grows significantly in her ability to enact financial schemes that come to fundamentally distinguish her from her initial good wife form.

All these financial actions leading up to Ruth's various cosmetic surgeries and purchasing of the High Tower are markedly eccentric in nature. Certainly, it is common for a woman to make certain financial decisions following a separation from a spouse related to infidelity, but to burn your house down to rid you of the burden of your children, or to embezzle your husband's private accounts so as to get him arrested, is arguably outside the norm. Ruth's unconventional behavior of this nature is indicative of Weldon's Menippean-style satire, which functions to provide commentary here on society's standard that a woman must be dependent on a man financially. Ruth flips that idea on its head, which is evident by the end of the novel, and provides a drastic contrast to the fragile, poor woman she was before she became the she-devil.

#### The Outcome of Ruth's Crowning Evolution

At the end of the novel, Ruth has obtained the High Tower, has successfully freed herself from her motherly and wifely duties, and has, essentially, destroyed the people who contributed most to her poor self-esteem – Bobbo and Mary. She is fulfilled in her newfound sense of power, and notes in a moment of reflection: "I cause Bobbo as much misery as he ever caused me, and more. I try not to, but somehow it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely of power. I have all, and he has none. As I

was, so he is now” (Weldon 241). In this recognition of her power and success in her evolution, she is crowned. She has taken the power from Bobbo, and intends to keep it that way.

On the whole, Ruth’s evolution following the explosion of her marriage is not an uncommon reaction to a spouse’s infidelity, but rather one that is satirically amplified so as to provoke questions from readers regarding what they define as feminism and how they view the roles of women in society. Lamanna and Riedmann note that a major key to a couple’s recovery following an affair is the “offended spouse’s” decision regarding their commitment to staying in a marriage that now lacks trust, as well as being “willing to let go of resentments as this becomes possible” (229). Since Bobbo, the offender, leaves Ruth, there is seemingly no other option than for their relationship to dissolve. Instead of even being given the opportunity to forgive him, then, Ruth is able to evolve into what he labels her – the she-devil – and become quite a different woman than she is at the beginning of the novel. Ruth finds her voice, begins to focus on her emotional and sexual satisfaction, and even gains much in terms of her financial independence. Throughout this process, it should be noted, “Weldon’s objective is not to write a morality tale – despite the moral questions presented – but rather to keep the moral ground in flux so that readers continually rethink their belief systems” (Reisman 647). In a sense then, Weldon genuinely toys with the earlier discussed idea of the rhetorical dimmer switch. In doing so, she consistently keeps readers questioning marital roles, expectations for women, and feminism as a whole, all due to the actions of a man that sparked a scorned woman’s epic evolution. The novel demonstrates how power, be it

held by the husband or the wife, can easily become corrupt within a marriage if it is too unevenly distributed. It begs equality as a solution, which quite directly refutes anti-feminist criticism.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion provided in the body of this thesis, it is evident that Weldon's novel is one that takes an unmatched approach to issues of femininity and the related societal expectations that have enforced inequality in heterosexual marriages since nearly the dawn of marriage's existence. As was exhibited in the earlier given history of marriage and its functions, it is an institution that has consistently placed men at the forefront, and seemingly given them passes on behavior that women would not receive similar ones for solely because of male breadwinner logic that dominated society prior to recent waves of feminism. This is a notion we see prevail in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, and one that Weldon works to provide social commentary on. Ruth's story is one that is eccentric, purposefully unrealistic, and yet still relatable to readers who can recognize the ironic double standards society has in place for married men versus married women. This is because Weldon successfully employs Bakhtin's critical characteristics of Menippean satire that have been explored throughout each chapter of this thesis, and in doing so, provokes readers' questioning of these concepts of inequality as well as the definition of feminism while allowing them to feel a sense of empathy for the underdog, Ruth, and her epic discrowning of her husband in her journey to her she-devil form.

Weldon's initial exposition of Ruth's life, which includes flashbacks to the origins of her marriage as well as real-time examples of its poor state, lays the framework for a reader's siding with Ruth that comes to function as a major tool in viewing her evolution and path to revenge as justified. In the beginning of the novel, Ruth starts off as the

scorned, worn out wife who has come to live in a state of false complacency surrounding her marriage. This is predominately because she has been conditioned by many influencing factors to believe that is all she is deserving of in life, and all she should aspire to. Ruth's mother, from a young age, taught her to devalue herself because of her lack of traditionally feminine beauty standards. Her schooling taught her that she should be so grateful to one day marry a man, and in return, should spend her days showing it by cooking, cleaning, and being an obedient wife to that man no matter his actions. The "Litany of the Good Wife" Ruth abides by as a whole enforces similar notions, and is indicative of the influences of Ruth's past as well as society in general when it comes to how a married woman is expected to behave. This litany is an embedded text in the novel, which is characteristic of what Bakhtin identifies as "heteroglossia" in his work, *Discourse on the Novel*. He notes:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the form for its incorporation), is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings, and two expressions. (Bakhtin 324)

For Weldon's novel, then, this applies to the litany in that it serves as a way for her to convey her satire of gendered expectations for wives that Ruth can directly interact with and respond to within the narrative. Its contents are a parody of the societal standards

wives are often oppressed by, and Ruth's transformation away from its restrictions is what leaves readers with a pro-woman takeaway, rather than an anti-feminist one.

When considering all of these influences alongside Bobbo's treatment of Ruth, it is easy for a reader to feel a sense of understanding for what she is experiencing, along with a sense of anger for the blatant double standards that allow Bobbo's behavior to ensue for so long. Once Ruth is finally free of Bobbo, she must learn how to be on her own, take back the crown, and embody the she-devil spirit that lives within her. To do so, she breaks free from many of the patriarchal standards that have dominated her life and marriage thus far. She finds her voice, which had previously been silenced by the "Litany of the Good Wife," and learns how and when to use it to her advantage. She also finds new senses of emotional and sexual freedom, which are also things she had been deprived of during the course of her early life and marriage. Most noticeably, she makes a major shift in terms of her financial status, as she goes from a housewife to a multi-millionaire all by way of revenge schemes that allow her to start her own business. Ultimately, she uses these newfound economic advantages to finally embody what society has taught her is beautiful, which is essentially Mary Fisher's form and lifestyle. In the end, Ruth has experienced a tremendous amount of personal growth and reflection that is indicative of Weldon's response to the societal expectations Ruth was previously abiding by.

Weldon sets Ruth's evolution up with a reader rooting for her success, and with the reader in support of Ruth in that manner, she then utilizes Ruth's aggressive path to revenge to provoke questions regarding what we as a society deem acceptable for women



versus men in a relationship, as well as how we view marriage as a whole. Weldon utilizes characteristics of the Menippean mode in doing so, which ultimately marks her novel as a strong piece of social commentary that is distinctive from the female-authored fiction landscape as a whole, and not wholly anti-feminist in nature.

Ruth Post-Evolution: *Death of a She-Devil*

In the 2018 sequel to *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, entitled *Death of a She-Devil*, Weldon furthers her Menippean social commentary by satirizing feminism's evolution from the first novel's publication in 1983 as well as the movement's current state. *Death of a She-Devil* chronicles the lives of Ruth and Bobbo in their old age, along with the lives of Ruth's grandchildren and even the ghost of Mary Fisher, who haunts the High Tower and provides narration of what goes on there. Ruth now leads the Institute for Gender Parity, which operates out of the High Tower and functions as an ironically all-female organization bent on promoting various feminist agendas. As literature critic Sarah Ditum notes, the position Ruth has found herself in is quite odd when considering how in the first novel, Ruth "is interested in sisterhood only so far as it serves her malicious project," which is her personal evolution from good wife to she-devil.

The sequel as a whole focuses mostly on the planning of a satirically inspired feminist event to be put on by the Institute called "Widdershins," which means "walking the other way," but also on the pressing lack of an heir to Ruth's legacy and role as the organization's leader. Ruth's assistant, Valerie Valeria, insists on Ruth's reuniting with her grandson, Tyler, who she has not spoken to in a matter of years. Valeria hopes Ruth will bridge the lack of a bond with her own grandson, and that in some way, this will then

potentially lead to Tyler's playing a role in the Institute. Ideally, their bond will be the focus of *Widdershins*, but Ruth is less attracted to this idea being that she arguably despises men at this point in her life.

In the novel, Tyler, who lacks direction in own life and will seemingly do whatever it takes to please the women around him, ultimately undergoes a gender transition to live as "Tayla," because he is convinced it will make finding some direction, like perhaps working in the Institute, much easier. His transition signifies a satiric jab at the belief that contemporary life is easier lived as a woman, and during this process, readers receive much indirect gendered social commentary from Weldon via Ruth's takes on Tyler's decision, the journey to the big day of *Widdershins*, and Tyler's eventual inheritance of Ruth's role post-transition, which comes at the close of the novel.

This sequel to Weldon's arguably most successful novel is one that continues her previous agenda of invoking reader's questioning of societal expectations for femininity and feminism through a satiric approach. What is significant, then, is the political context Weldon places the story in, which leaves room for commentary on gender transitions as well as subtle jabs at "Trumpian" takes on issues such as a climate change and public relations scandals (Harris). At the forefront, though, Weldon's sequel functions predominately to comment on modern feminism and its flaws that have come to develop in the years that have passed since its predecessor's publication. Irish critic Amy Harris agrees with this sentiment in her own review of the novel, stating: "Everything in the novel shows: feminism, like the She-Devil's face, is a construct grown bulged, botched, and lopsided over the years" (Harris). This opinion conveyed by Weldon is evidenced in

Ruth's commentary throughout the novel, with a primary example coming from a speech at an Institute for Gender Parity board meeting, during which she states: "Women of the world, unite, [...] you have nothing to lose but the chains of stale group-think" (Weldon 290).

Much like the first novel, the sequel did not come without critical backlash, though this time the criticism thus far has been less regarding anti-feminist readings of Weldon's work, and more so regarding the transphobic notions of Tyler's evolution. Perhaps this is because readers can recognize a sense of truth in Weldon's take on the state of the feminist movement, but cannot get on board with her employing the highly relevant concept of gender transition for the sake of satire.

For Tyler, transition is driven by ideas that the world around him has become androphobic, and thus, he must live as a woman solely to make his life easier, rather than because of the dysphoria that often surrounds genuine transgender experiences. While Weldon attempts to revisit the idea of evolution with Tyler instead of Ruth, she seemingly fails to recognize the social context her satire implies for transgender people in real life. When you consider her earlier quoted remarks about her anti-feminists critiques, though, it is fair to presume more critical delving into her personal justifications by implementing a transgender storyline are necessary to understanding her version of the satiric purpose behind it, which as always, is probably intended to make some people mad. Since the novel was released in 2018, the critical conversation is still at its very beginnings, and it will be interesting to see it develop over time when considering the growing awareness of transgender identities and rights.

### Weldon and Satire: An Unrivaled Pair

Overall, when considering Weldon's satire in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* alongside the novel's sequel, *Death of a She-Devil*, it is fair to argue that her satiric approach is one that is directly Menippean in nature, and seemingly unrivaled by other female satirists in the literary game. This thesis has proven this via its overarching discussion of Weldon's takes on societal expectations for women, marriage, and feminism seen in chapters one through three, as well as in the brief overview of how this is expanded into the novel's recent sequel seen in this concluding chapter. Certainly, the approaches Weldon takes are provocative in nature, and can often be met with backlash from the communities she is read as attacking with her satire. Despite that, she still puts forth worthwhile social commentary by invoking readers to question the concepts she addresses for themselves, which is largely the function of Menippean satire in its most direct form.

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