MARY WARD BROWN AND HER SHORT STORIES OF THE SOUTH

By

Angela Marie Fuhrman

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CHAPTER I

For most authors, writing is something that they feel compelled to do. Driven by instinct and necessity, writers dedicate themselves to the page because through the written word, they are able to release themselves and their ideas into the world. In an interview with Bill Caton, author of Fighting Words, author Mary Ward Brown comments on every writer's need for personal expression and the undeniable calling each writer experiences:

> [Writing] is something you're born doing. People who don't write are struck by things and they remember them. But they don't come out. If you write fiction, you want to let it out. I think you wonder how other human beings react. I think it's a search to see the meaning of what's stuck in your mind. (119)

There is an inner passion that drives the creative writer, a passion to share and divulge the stories held within the spirit. But for most writers, there must be a balance between their creative endeavors and their lives beyond the page.

In order to venture into the realm of creative fiction, a person must be very strong because the task of writing is so deeply personal, involving the outpouring of one's thoughts, feelings, and reactions. However, because writing is an inherent drive within a person's spirit, it becomes evident that one must be even stronger to deny him/herself the expression of the pen and the written word. For author Mary Ward Brown, the act of writing is something that she is driven to do; yet, just as her writing career began to take

off, she sacrificed her love of the craft for the greater love of her family. In an interview with Peggy Brawley for People Magazine, Brown remarks, "To do good work takes the concentration of a lifetime" (85). Hers is a story of unselfish love and personal sacrifice. At around the age of 36, Brown stopped composing and, for twenty-five years, gave up her writing career for the love and success of her family. Brown states that "I knew something important was missing from my life [...] but I also knew that something more important was in it. You don't give up any more than you get" (qtd. in Brawley 88). Brown made a choice in her life that most creative types would be unable to make. Thus, she proved both her strength and determination when she put down her pen and stopped writing in the mid 1950s, only to resume the craft twenty-five years later.

In a contemporary society where women are often expected to raise a family and maintain a successful career, some modern women would criticize Brown's choice, citing that her sacrifices essentially denied Brown the ability to maintain her own identity, separate from her role as mother and housewife. But for Brown, her own happiness was not dependent on her own success but rather was dependent on the happiness and success of her family. In Brown's opinion, "Women are going to learn to their sorrow that they can't do both. They can't do everything. Children being raised in daycare, I wonder how they are going to fare in the world. I think women have a built-in biological destiny to bear and raise children" (qtd. in Caton 118). Yet Brown admits that she has done everything: "I've had some of the best of both worlds—family and writing" (qtd. in J. E. Brown xvii). For twenty-five years, Brown focused on her role as mother and wife, but throughout her time off from writing, she was able to soak in her surrounding

environment—a southern society that was in the midst of great change and social upheaval. In an online posting for Capitol Book and News in Montgomery, Alabama, the author of the piece maintains that "putting pen to paper is only the end stage of writing. And it turned out that Mary was not exactly 'not writing' all those years; instead, she was really 'doing research,' storing up the experiences and observations, and the feel of her time and her place, and of the people in it" ("Mary" par. 4). Eventually, Brown allowed her twenty-five years of "research" to slowly trickle out of her memory and onto the page, and after her hiatus from the craft of writing, she had an entire segment of her life stored within her memory. Throughout her sabbatical, Brown witnessed the changing of a region and the resulting reactions of a community, but when she chose her family over her writing, Mary Ward Brown did what many working mothers only dream of doing. Overall, she made choices that allowed her to be proud of her life work, both as a mother and as an artist.

According to Jerry Elijah Brown, Mary Ward was born in 1917 to Thomas Ira Ward and Mary Hubbard Fitts Ward. Mary was their only daughter, and while both Mary Hubbard and Thomas had sons from their previous marriages, Mary was their youngest and their only child together. After Mary's birth, her parents remained in Perry County, working as both merchants and farmers. Here, in the Black Belt region of southern Alabama, Mary Ward grew up and learned about life as a southerner. Mary's parents had moved to Perry County seven years before Mary's birth, and upon settling, Mary's father built and managed a store on his property. For the Wards, there was work to be done indoors and out as Mary's father worked as both a retailer inside the family

store and as a farmer on the family land. While the lower half of the Ward family store was for merchandise, the upper half of the building served as home for the family until Mary was six years old (J. E. Brown x). J. E. Brown notes in his introduction to Tongues of Flame: "When she was about six, her father built an American Bungalow-style house about fifty steps from the store; he found the plans in a book and used heart pine grown on his own land and sawed at his mill" (x). As with most southern farms, the family home and the store functioned as the center of the plantation community.

Throughout her childhood and into her teens, Mary Ward Brown was always intrigued by language and writing. J. E. Brown comments that "Although the land is a central presence in her life, she has also always been fascinated with writing. As a child, she loved to 'put things into sentences'" (xiii). He goes on to note that her fascination with words continued into her teens when she became the editor of her high school newspaper. When she was old enough to attend college, Mary remained close to home and attended Judson College, a Baptist woman's college, which offered Mary the opportunity to explore her love of words. While enrolled at Judson, Mary continued to study the field of journalism, taking a few classes in reporting and again working as an editor for Judson's student newspaper (J. E Brown xiii). According to the Judson Triangle, the college's online magazine, Mary graduated from Judson in 1938 with a bachelor's degree in English, but instead of leaving, she stayed on with the school as a publicity director. While she was working as Judson's publicity director, she met her future husband, Kirtley Brown, at a public relations conference in April 1939. At the time of their meeting, Kirtley, a Baylor graduate, was also working as a publicity director

for Alabama Polytechnic Institute (Auburn University). Although Kirtley was fourteen years older than Mary, the two fell in love and were married on Mary's twenty-second birthday, within only two months of their first meeting (Allison par. 2-3). J. E. Brown notes that in 1942, Kirtley Ward Brown, Mary and Kirtley's only child, was born (xii). Brawley's article reveals that after their marriage and the birth of their son, the Brown family lived in Auburn for seven years while Kirtley continued his job as publicity director. However, after Mary's father's death, Mary and Kirtley discovered that Mary's father had left the family house and land to Mary, his only daughter (88). With Mary's father's death, the Browns were suddenly faced with a life-changing decision. Would they remain in Auburn, or would they return to Hamburg to oversee the family farm? In 1946, Mary and Kirtley returned with their son to Mary's childhood home in Hamburg, Alabama, and although he had no previous agricultural experience, Kirtley Brown decided to take his chances as a farmer (J. E. Brown xii). As J. E. Brown reveals, she returned to her childhood home to learn that "Cotton was giving way to cattle, and black people were moving off the land. Mary Ward Brown estimates that at one time about 250 black people lived in cabins scattered across her family's holdings. Now there are only cabin sites and no tenants" (xii). As time progressed, society changed, and the familiar plantation atmosphere of Brown's childhood had slowly become obsolete. J. E. Brown notes that by the time Mary returned to her parents' home, southern society was on the verge of significant social change and upheaval as the plantation atmosphere of the past started to slowly fade into the background (xii). The change that Brown witnessed throughout her home town of Hamburg would eventually become the basis for many

stories that would document the evolution of small town southern life. Overall, life on the farm was tough for Mary and her family. Not only were she and her husband entering into a new lifestyle, but during the early years, Mary was struggling to maintain and cultivate a newfound passion—creative writing.

Always an avid reader, Brown became interested in writing when her sister-in-law loaned Mary a few books discussing the craft of writing. According to J. E. Brown, Mary's sister-in-law, Margery Finn Brown, had garnered minor success when some of her stories were published in magazines like Redbook and McCalls. Craving more than the writing books could teach her, Brown eventually enrolled in a creative writing class at the University of Alabama under the tutelage of Craig Stewart, where she learned the techniques of the craft. Every week Brown and her husband traveled in their car to Tuscaloosa so she could pursue her passion of creative writing. In addition to her work in Tuscaloosa, Brown eventually enrolled in a correspondence course offered through the University of North Carolina. The professor conducting the course was poet Charles Edward Eaton, and under his guidance Brown flourished and at last began submitting her work to various journals and literary magazines (xiv). As the Brown family settled into their life on the farm, Mary struggled with her creative ambitions. In an interview, Brown reveals, "I didn't want to mortgage the land [...] so we did without things. We never went anywhere. I was upstairs trying to write fiction, and Kirtley was trying to run this awful farm. My conscience hurt all the time" (qtd. in Brawley 88). Devoted to her family yet driven by her passion for words and stories, Brown desperately tried to balance her career as a writer and her responsibility as both a mother and a wife. By

1955 her hard work finally paid off when her first story, "The Flesh, The Spirit, and Willie Mae," was published in the Kansas City Review. During the 1950s, Brown published several stories, and as Brawley notes in her interview with Brown, Mary even secured an agent in New York (88). From 1955 to 1959 a few of Brown's other stories were published in the Kansas City Review and the Carolina Quarterly. However, after "No Sound in the Night" appeared in the 1958-1959, Volume 3 edition of the Carolina Quarterly, Brown's fiction would not be published again until 1978. Although this story was published around 1959, Brown had given up her writing career years before. While no source cites the exact date Brown put down her pen, Peggy Brawley notes that Brown only wrote for six years during the 1950s (88). Thus, after struggling with a guilty conscience, Brown did the most selfless act any artist can do: she gave up writing.

Although Brown acknowledges that "something important was missing from my life," she does not regret her decision to stop writing (qtd. in Brawley 88). In the interview with Caton, she states, "I stopped because of my family. It did take away [from writing time]. The great women writers, some of them were married, but they didn't have children. I wouldn't have done it differently. It was my duty to look after my family" (118).

J. E. Brown notes that as the years progressed, Kirtley Brown managed to maintain the farm and was able to return to his career in public relations, eventually working for Marion Military Institute as a publications director. Unfortunately, in 1970 Kirtley Brown died of lung cancer, leaving Mary to run the farm by herself. With her husband deceased and her son Kirtley Ward Brown grown and starting his own family,

Mary Ward Brown returned to her fiction, and this time she had nothing holding her back. After her husband's death, Brown started writing when she became inspired after making a trip to Europe (J. E. Brown xiii-xv).

During her hiatus from writing, Brown witnessed the changing of a region as the South experienced dramatic social upheaval both throughout and after the Civil Rights Era. The transformation she saw and the people around her provided Brown with an abundance of material. By 1978 Brown had another story in publication, and she has not stopped since. Brown's return to fiction has been a successful venture, and since her return to writing, Brown has established herself as one of the most outstanding contemporary writers in southern literature.

Starting in the 1950s and progressing into 2002, Mary Ward Brown's stories have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including repeat publications in Best American Short Stories and New Stories from the South: The Year's Best. Her first collection of short stories, Tongues of Flame, received the PEN-Hemingway award in 1987 for best short fiction, the Alabama Library Association Award in 1987, and the Lillian Smith Book Award in 1991. In addition, Brown's second collection of stories, It Wasn't All Dancing, published in 2002, continues to receive critical acclaim and popular success. In May 2002, Brown was recognized for her lifetime achievement when she received the Harper Lee Award in Monroeville, Alabama, and in 2003, Brown was the recipient of the Fellowship of Southern Writers Hillsdale Prize for fiction. In addition to Brown's numerous awards, her stories continue to be reprinted and anthologized, a testament to her longevity and her skill as a writer. At the age of eighty-six, Mary Ward

Brown continues to produce stories that capture her version of the South and document the experiences of a lifetime.

Today, Brown lives in Perry County and resides in the same house she grew up in. Other than her family and her work, the Ward family house was, and still is, the center of Brown's world. Within the pine-framed rooms of her childhood home, Brown composes and edits stories that describe past and contemporary Southern society. In several published interviews with Brown, interviewers give detailed descriptions of Brown's house (Brawley, Caton, and Lawley). Brown describes the house as "a home on what was a plantation, but it's not a plantation-style home in the grand sense" (qtd. in Lawley). However, the house itself stands as a testament to a past way of life. In an interview with Brown, Peggy Brawley comments on the absence of any vestige of plantation life such as the store, sawmill, and cotton gin (88). The various descriptions of Brown's home suggest Brown's connection to the land, to the environment, and to the past that the house so vividly represents. Currently, Brown still manages her family land, renting out plots to various farmers and "has herself added ten acres to the holdings" (J. E Brown xiii).

As several interviewers describe the setting of Brown's home, each interviewer conscientiously mentions the stacks of books and periodicals found throughout her house, alluding to Brown's own preoccupation with reading and the works of other writers (Caton 118-119 and J. E. Brown xiii). J. E. Brown notes, "Though the rooms are small, light from the many windows gives the whole house a rich glow, setting off the antique furnishings, the hundreds of books and, in one upstairs room, the author's Macintosh

word processor and laser printer" (xi). Writing in the same house she started in years ago, Mary Ward Brown continues to weave her stories, telling and describing the world that has always been just outside her door.

For Brown, the modern-day conventions of computer and printer aid in her process but have only slightly modified her method. The process of writing is a very laborious task for Brown. According to Jim Lawley, a reporter for The Decatur Daily, Brown starts the writing process with pen and paper, writing all notes in longhand, and eventually transferring all of her handwritten material onto her computer: "It's not pages a day she produces—it's sentences, maybe a paragraph or two, a day" (Lawley, "Dallas"). The daily process of writing for Brown begins in the early hours of the morning and progresses until about 9 a.m. During an interview, Brown reveals her daily routine:

> I got up at five o'clock this morning and stopped around nine. I go straight to work when I get up. I find that if I get dressed or straighten the house I get side-tracked. I work in bed first and go over what I did the day before. Then in the afternoon I put it on the computer. I don't do much in longhand except to make changes. (qtd. in Caton 120)

Hers is a process dependent on heavy revision and meticulous attention. Just as it was her duty to look after her family, she has a similar duty to her readers. Brown admits, "I do sentences twenty-four times sometimes. I do them over and over to get the greatest effect" (qtd. in Caton 120). In a sense, Brown's dedication to quality work only further reiterates her drive to be successful, no matter what role she is playing. Whether wife,

mother, or writer, Brown acts out of a love and passion for her work. Brown states, "I don't know how good a judge I am. I think what I do is honest. I try to tell the truth and I think I do that in my own simple way. Before I send a story out I have done the absolute best I can do with that piece of work. It's an honest effort" (qtd. in Caton 119).

When discussing her talent as a writer, Brown is extremely modest. In one interview she comments on her skill and her speed: "I think if I had more talent I could write faster. I have to struggle with the sentences and move them around and change words around....But that was just the way the cookie crumbled for me" (qtd. in Caton 118). While Brown views her meticulousness as a fault, others would argue that her attention to detail is evidence of her dedication and commitment to her craft and to her readers. Laboring over words and phrases, Brown admits to taking her time with her writing (Lawley). But her pace is not a sign of incompetency; instead, Brown's deliberation allows her to carefully craft and manipulate her media. "When you think about all the ways you can write one sentence," Brown explains to one local reporter, "it's amazing" (Lawley).

Perhaps one of the most inspiring aspects of Brown's writing is that her stories move beyond simple entertainment. When asked about her revision process, Brown responded by stating, "I think of revising a story as 'making it work.' You make it do what it's supposed to do, tell a story so you [the reader] will understand it, so you will be touched, affected by it" (qtd. in Paul 4). Indeed, Brown's stories do more than provide a snapshot of southern life; her stories make the reader stop and think about the people and the places. In some of her stories the readers get a sense that Brown is writing out of a

sense of obligation. Because she has encountered and seen what many have not, Brown is compelled to offer her readers the opportunity to see what she has seen and experienced. Through her fiction and with an unflinching honesty, Brown captures the changing face of the South and documents the people and the mores of southern society. Brown's stories prod her readers into a contemplative state as her characters appear familiar, so real that they can easily be found in any small town in the South and yet so subtly flawed that often the readers are caught between sympathy and incredulity. Many characters throughout Brown's short stories provoke her readers to contemplate their own lives as issues such as racial prejudice, class discrimination, and ageism reveal themselves. Brown's stories document that moment of discovery as her characters slowly gain insight into their own lives and personalities. Her stories are a reflection of life and of people. Her work is timeless in that it provides lifelong lessons about people, about history, about where the South was and where it is today. Indeed, Brown's stories have an honesty that seems to rely on human experience and empathy as all of Brown's protagonists undergo an evolution whereby they come to see their situation from a new perspective.

Brown's stories work on two different levels. In one aspect, Brown's stories are time capsules, providing glimpses into the past, into a region undergoing change. Yet, Brown's stories are timeless in their message because time itself is a process of transition as one generation crosses into the next. Thus, her stories speak to humanity and comment on the way people treat each other. When discussing her work, Brown comments, "It's so risky to try to write fiction. I was fifty-three when my husband died.

I could have done something that I knew would be productive. I could have helped people live. Five years from the time I'm dead my book could be [in a bin at Goodwill]. I could have lost my gamble that I could do anything that could amount to anything" (qtd. in Caton 121). But Brown has indeed "helped people live." Her stories bring characters to life, and through her characters, Brown gives her readers the opportunity to see glimpses of themselves; there is a verisimilitude in Brown's stories that dares the average readers to search for, or learn about, themselves within the text. Almost acting like a mirror, Brown's stories force her readers to ask themselves the question, "Do I see myself in this picture?" Through the tangibility of her characters and their stories, Brown touches her readers, and this is how her fiction moves beyond pure entertainment. As Brown states in an interview, her stories do not provide answers: "I don't think my stories add up to any conclusions about life. They don't come up with any formula or conclusion. They leave questions hanging. What they do add up to is its importance—human life, its importance" (qtd. in Paul 5).

When asked why she writes, Brown responds by saying, "I just wanted to do the stories. I don't know why. Maybe the same instinct as 'Kilroy was here'" ("Mary" Alabama Arts Council). At the age of eighty-six, Brown has made a lasting mark in the canon of southern literature. After publishing her first collection of short stories, Tongues of Flame in 1987, she gained admiration and respect from many critics and readers throughout the nation. J. E. Brown comments on the popularity of Brown's first collection: "Tongues of Flame was instantly popular. Though eight of the stories had been published earlier, the collection itself established Mary Ward Brown's identity"

(xv). As a testament to her ability as a writer, the year Tongues of Flame was published, Mary Ward Brown won the PEN/Hemingway Award for best first work of fiction, and her wide-ranging appeal was evident as critics from across the country read and commented on this first collection of stories.

While most literary critics praised Brown's skill and simple prose, a few critics condemned the writer for her simplicity in both style and subject matter. In his review for The Washington Post, critic Jonathan Yardley wrote a scathing critique of Brown's fiction: "A handful of its [Tongues of Flame's] 11 stories are interesting, but most are the work of a writer who has a great deal to learn about narrative and who has yet to find her own voice; her sincerity is evident, but so too is her artlessness" (B2). Yardley criticized Brown's subject matter and believed that her stories left little for reader interpretation. Although he grudgingly admired Brown's short stories "The Amaryllis" and "Good-bye, Cliff," Yardley believed that " in their didactic treatment of theme they underscore the show-and-tell problem with which Brown is afflicted" (B2). Yardley's negative assessment of Tongues of Flame in The Washington Post stood out as the most negative critique of Brown's first collection. In a much more balanced review for the Los Angeles Times, critic Richard Eder balanced his negative opinions with comments praising Brown's skill as a storyteller. Again, as in Yardley's review, Eder criticized the simplicity with which Brown presents some of her themes and the predictability of stories like "Disturber of the Peace," "Good-bye, Cliff," and "The Black Dog." But like Yardley, Eder praised Brown's story "The Amaryllis," noting that "It is a marvelous story: gay, sad, and unexpected" (2). Rather than discounting the entire collection, Eder

complimented a few stories that he felt were particularly intriguing and skillfully executed. Besides "The Amaryllis," Eder cited "Tongues of Flame" and "Beyond New Forks" as two stories that were well constructed and less manufactured than some of the other stories within the collection.

Aside from Eder and Yardley, an assortment of critics from publications like The Birmingham News, The News and Observer of Charlotte, North Carolina, and The New York Times had only positive assessments of Brown's first collection. In a review for The News and Observer, reviewer Alex Albright compared Mary Ward Brown's prose style to the work of Flannery O'Connor, and in The Birmingham News, E. C. LeVert mentioned Brown's name among O'Connor, Welty, and Faulker, some of the greatest southern writers in twentieth-century southern fiction. In praise of Brown's work and in response to Brown's critics, E. C. LeVert noted, "That Brown's subjects and techniques are basically conventional will please many, and irritate a few, particularly those who require formal innovation in contemporary Southern writing" (6F). However, LeVert came to Brown's defense when he stated, "Brown's characters, like her style, are deceptively plain, but acutely rendered, drawn from the several strata of small town, Black Belt life" (6F). LeVert praised the simple prose style of Brown, and instead of discrediting her work as overly simple or contrived, he commended Brown on her "sly sense of ornament" (6F). In another positive review, critic Alex Albright applauded Brown and her creative characterization of a region and a people that were marred by racial unrest. Writing for Charlotte's The News and Observer, Albright commented on Brown's economical prose style and the effectiveness of her words: "She creates, in a

few precise details, rich and vibrant settings that seem to release, like the surprise aroma of forgotten rooms, characters in every small Southern town" (4D). Unlike other reviews, Albright was chiefly impressed with Brown's treatment of race, noting her ability to see beyond the obvious arguments and separations plaguing southern society. Critic Kathryn Morton in the New York Times Book Review, praised Tongues of Flame and Mary Ward Brown's ability to place the reader in the moment: "You can smell the starch when an ancient and ailing black woman's musty bedclothes have been taken by her daughters and returned to the bed 'aggressively clean'"(6). Morton's review of Brown's collection did not gush with compliments but acknowledges that the stories are "well written" (6). Morton concludes on a positive note, using a rather oversimplified simile to demonstrate the timelessness and warmth conveyed in Brown's fiction: "Mary Ward Brown writes like a woman offering warm homemade bread" (6).

In various online reviews, Brown's Tongues of Flame continued to be admired and respected for its simple prose style and treatment of subject matter. The Magill Book Review noted that Brown's "stories are powerful testimony to the author's understanding of the South and of human nature. They will appeal to a broad range of readers who want stories written with skill and feeling" (par.1). In addition to printed book reviews, Brown's Tongues of Flame received favorable online reviews from the University of Alabama Press and from Mae Barrena, a critic for the Southern Scribe website. Both online reviews touted Mary Ward Brown as a skillful artist who writes in a style similar to Eudora Welty. Barrena noted, "She [Brown] writes with a powerful perceptiveness that moves through rural matters to universal concerns, treating the most mundane of

chores, like buying a dress, to a monumentally important deed of caring for a prized Amaryllis, with equal importance" (par.1).

For her first collection, Mary Ward Brown's reception within the writing community was generally warm, with only a couple of exceptions. However, Brown's artistry and skill as a writer were further established when she received the 1987 Pen/Hemingway Foundation Award. Upon receiving the award, the judges praised Brown for "seeing life whole, without prejudice, without sentimentality, without histrionics. Her voice may be quiet—sometimes she speaks in a whisper—but her words are, nevertheless, always forceful, clear, and ultimately lasting" ("Spring and Summer" par. 3).

When Tongues of Flame first came out, Brown was seventy years old and about to experience the thrill of critical success (J. E. Brown xiii). A month after Tongues of Flame came out in paperback, People magazine reported that the rights for the book went for $15,000 (Brawley 85). After the book's initial publication, popularity soared, and Brown was no longer an unknown author. Tongues of Flame established Brown as a prominent figure within contemporary southern fiction, and her success as an author is remarkable because she, unlike many authors, gained popular success later in her life.

While most people at the age of seventy would be looking at retirement, Brown's success with Tongues of Flame only propelled her further. In her fiction, her age and her experience are an advantage because she is able to view life from a more comprehensive perspective. Having experienced life as a mother, wife, and now writer, Brown brings these experiences to her fiction. Whether planned or not, Brown has spent a lifetime

researching her stories, and her stories are the result of years of experience; she has lived and learned. In an interview, Brown states:

> Writing is not fun. It's a deep pleasure. Is pleasure the word? Maybe a need. It's not recreation. It's hard work. Always a search, a desperate search to give form to experience. Autobiography is not fiction. You have to be detached from your experience. If the author's ego is in there it ruins it. The experience has to be reprocessed through your imagination. (qtd. in Caton 121)

Indeed, for Brown, giving form to a lifetime of experience has resulted in a body of work that captures a region and a group of people, progressing through life and encountering change.

In 2002, fifteen years after her first collection of short stories was published, Brown produced her second collection of short stories, entitled It Wasn't All Dancing. Although several of the stories within the collection had been previously published in a variety of literary journals, a few of the short stories were new additions to Brown's body of work. Overall, the collection received praise for its presentation of theme and for its simplistic tone. Reviewers from periodicals throughout the South and a few from outside the region commended Brown on her sophomore success. In his review for Southern Scribe, author Wayne Greenhaw noted, "It Wasn't All Dancing moves on beyond Tongues of Flame, her earlier collection. It gives us more of the people of their precious world ("It Wasn't" par. 8). Greenhaw commented on Brown's emphasis of place throughout her second collection, stating that the place "is as Southern as molasses. It's real and true" ("It Wasn't" par. 6). For Brown, the definition of place moves beyond

simple geography, and Greenhaw applauded Brown's capacity to capture a region and its people ("It Wasn't). While Greenhaw praised Brown's second collection, critic Jeff Zaleski gave reluctant praise in his review for Publishers Weekly, describing it as "competent" in its presentation of a "kind of old-fashioned South" (par. 1). His review was not entirely negative; Zaleski regarded the book as effective and proficient in its presentation of place: "Though her collection is not striking, it is an effective portrait of a time and a place in which broad change was felt through small, personal experiences, was seen the way a face might be when reflected in a distant mirror" (par. 1). In contrast to Zaleski's unenthusiastic admiration, critic Steven B. Yates in The Clarion Ledger of Jackson, Mississippi commended Brown for her simplistic style when he wrote: "Getting at that truth with lean skill is Brown's great strength, and her plain, straight-to-the-marrow prose is her scalpel. Highfalutin symbols don't happen in these country stories, and metaphors, if they come at all, are similes quick and hand crafted" (4F). Yates also applauded Brown's attention to character description and the "inner lives of her characters" (4F). Like many of the reviews from southern periodicals, Yates acknowledged the familiarity of Brown's characters and setting: "We know we've met her people. Near story's end, we don't want to leave them behind. And long after we've set the book aside, we grow lonesome for them yet again" (4F).

Perhaps, this familiarity with character and setting is what separates some of the negative reviews of her earlier work from some of the more positive reviews as Brown connects with her southern readers through a shared memory or personal history. While one early review of Tongues of Flame criticized her prose style as "short on subtlety"

(Yardley B2), reviews for her second collection overwhelmingly praise Brown for her ability to capture the stories and the people of her region. In a review for The Decatur Daily, critic Randy Cross wrote, "Her stories are not built to epic scale, her characters are not heroic. But they are us, our own stories, our own selves struggling through the daunting adventure of everyday life and sometimes winning, even if only by a glittering tear" (par. 7). With a similar message, reviewer Hal Jacobs noted in an article for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that It Wasn't All Dancing "looks closely at small moments in the lives of Southerners to reveal great truths about the role that race, class, and religion play in the region" (par. 1). There is obviously a trend of opinion when one looks at the reviews from both of Brown's collections. Those reviewers who are writing from outside the region tend to criticize Brown for her lack of ingenuity in about subject matter; however, reviewers from southern periodicals extol Mary Ward Brown as a writer who unflinchingly writes the truth. In his radio book review for Alabama Public Radio, Don Noble praised Brown's collection It Wasn't All Dancing when he noted her ability to manipulate ideas and symbols within her work: "In Mary Ward Brown's fiction, objects vibrate with meanings, not just one, but many, an endless vibration" (par. 12). Noble commented on Brown's capacity to cover numerous themes in her work, but he also commends her ability to make her readers reflect: "The stories are intense. Each one brought this reader to a full stop. Each one must be savored and digested before it is possible to move on" (par. 3).

Those reviewers who criticize Brown for being too conventional mischaracterize her work as predictable instead of seeing her stories for what they are—the truth. Indeed,

Brown writes about what she knows—the South. Brown writes about southern people, places, and problems because, like so many other writers, she is comfortable with the familiar. In an interview, Brown states that her creativity is sparked by reality: "The creative process starts with a germ and you manipulate it with the writing. It could be a bit of conversation. Something gets your attention and it doesn't go away. It begins to gather information around it" (qtd. in Caton 119). Indeed, when she returned to writing, Brown had half a lifetime of conversations from which she generated her stories. However, moving beyond setting, Brown's stories do more than capture a region—they capture people who, regardless of place, struggle to accept change and are often forced to see things from new perspectives

Through her characters, Brown captures a multitude of divergent perspectives. Her stories showcase the diversity of the southern region and the coalescence of distinct groups under shared circumstances, stretching across gender, race, class, and age as she writes about life through a variety of paradoxical viewpoints and personas. Thus, the stories document the development of character consciousness as her protagonists gain insight and achieve a greater understanding of issues like life, love, death, and happiness. As a result, Brown's characters stumble into their enlightenment as they progress through various situations. Her stories do not present earth-shattering conflict, but rather chronicle her characters' gradual discovery as they experience life and encounter other individuals. As life plunges forward, the characters within her stories try to cope with new situations or unexpected circumstances. Accordingly, Brown's stories climax when her characters suddenly reach a pinnacle of realization, and for most of her protagonists,

full awareness occurs unexpectedly and is often the culmination of a number of events. Each of the stories within Tongues of Flame and It Wasn't All Dancing examines the protagonists' journey toward understanding themselves and their surroundings, for Brown's stories reveal the intricacies of the human heart and soul as her characters struggle to find their place in a changing environment.

Brown's protagonists feel a separation from other characters, a separation caused by a defining characteristic or circumstance. Her character's struggle to identify, overcome, or accept the differences between themselves and other characters as they experience some type of noticeable change within their lives. Some protagonists experience the absence or loss of a loved one; however, for other characters, change is less dramatic and more gradual. Change occurs in three ways: either physical, psychological, or a combination of both. Often, physical change stimulates and produces psychological change, but whatever the circumstances, the characters within her stories are reacting to the inevitable progression of life, encompassing a variety of changing social institutions and guidelines. On the subject of race, Brown captures the complex transformation of a region through her characters and their revelations of both internal and external struggles. Her stories that discuss race distinguish between past and present circumstances and capture the racial tensions that existed between the races as the South moved out of the Civil Rights Era, with black and white citizens forced to redefine their roles within southern society.

While race is one of many issues presented within Brown's fiction, it is not the only theme explored. In other stories, class, love, gender, lifestyle, and age serve as the

impetus for character conflict. Subsequently, Brown stories can be classified and organized according to theme. The following chapters provide the reader with an overview of Brown's work and are divided into specific thematic categories that focus on her protagonists and their internal reactions to external situations. Chapters Two through Nine demonstrate how Brown uses similar themes to uncover her protagonists' separation from others as she simultaneously describes her characters' subsequent progression toward a moment of awareness. Rather than looking at the two collections independently, these eight chapters focus on the totality of Brown's work, including three stories published outside of her collected works. Chapter Two discusses the two stories "New Dresses" and "Alone in a Foreign Country" and explores the protagonist's position as a foreigner in an unfamiliar environment. Focusing on race, Chapters Three and Four dissect the relationships between Brown's black and white characters. While Chapter Three contains an analysis of the stories "Swing Low: A Memoir," "The Cure," and "Beyond New Forks" and reviews the dynamics of friendship across racial lines as presented by the characters within these stories. Chapter Four discusses the conflicts between black and white characters in the stories "Fruit of the Season," "Let Him Live," and "A Meeting in the Road." These stories discussed in Chapter Four focus primarily on the tension and frustration as both white and black characters adapt to life after the Civil Rights era. Chapter Five, analysis of Brown's story "The Black Dog," looks at the general disruption that occurs when the protagonist is forced to deal with an unwanted presence and describes the conflict that ensues when one woman's comfortable life is interrupted by an unwanted black dog. In contrast, Chapter Six explores the existence of

class divisions and the significance of social order in five short stories: "The Barbecue," "The Parlor Tumblers," "Tongues of Flame," "A Good Heart," and "The Gesture." Chapter Seven assesses the effects of romantic love upon an array of diverse characters in the four stories: "Disturber of the Peace," "No Sound in the Night," "The Birthday Cake," and "The Lost Love." Next, Chapter Eight discusses the theme of personal sacrifice as presented in the stories, "Once in a Lifetime," "Good-Bye, Cliff," "The House that Asa Built," "It Wasn't All Dancing," and "Last of the Species." Finally, Chapter nine discusses the themes of death and bereavement in the stories "The Amaryllis" and "A New Life" and focuses on the protagonists' struggles to rediscover life after suffering a substantial personal loss. Because her stories are presented from a variety of different perspectives, chapters two through nine will attempt to illuminate Brown's ability to write across gender, race, class, age, and lifestyle. Brown's stories are driven by her characters: men and women who find themselves changing and evolving. Brown explores both the external and internal conflicts of her characters as they are often forced to reevaluate their positions and their ideas regarding life. Reviewed as a whole, Brown's stories document her protagonists' psychological change as they come to a moment of realization.

CHAPTER II

Loneliness is a feeling that all humans experience at some point in their lives, yet loneliness stems from more than the physical quality of being alone. As people attempt to inhabit new environments, separation from the familiar often creates anxiety and tension as feelings of loneliness become more pronounced. In the two stories "Alone in a Foreign Country" and "New Dresses" Brown introduces the theme of isolation as her two protagonists try to cope with their roles as outsiders in an unfriendly environment. The second line of Mary Ward Brown's short story "Alone in a Foreign Country" states, "She was from Mississippi and this was Moscow, six thousand miles from home" (Brown, It Wasn't 92). While this line emphasizes the actual mileage separating the main character, Cathy, from her home in Mississippi, the line also seems to convey, in a more abstract way, the cultural separation that exists between Cathy, a girl from Mississippi, and her foreign surroundings. Although this line is taken from "Alone in a Foreign Country," the sense of isolation and cultural division suggested in this line is reminiscent of Brown's other story "New Dresses" and the feelings of isolation experienced by the main character, Lisa, who, like Cathy, is categorized as a stranger in her environment. For Lisa, "the Deep South [is] like a foreign country" (Brown, Tongues 8) as Lisa struggles to find peace with her mother-in-law, Mrs. Worthy, and the southern society Mrs. Worthy represents. Cathy and Lisa are products of their own mental torment as each woman becomes profoundly aware of her position as a foreigner and, as a result, chooses to

continually stand on the defensive, alert and ready to defend her position. Feeling stranded and alone, both women crave personal attention, and the stories are driven by the selfish preoccupations of the main characters. As each story progresses, sympathy dwindles for each of the characters as their behaviors appear to be somewhat petty and frivolous. As a contrast to the egotism of Lisa and Cathy, Brown introduces the theme of human mortality, and as both characters are forced to look death in the face, each woman learns something about herself. While Lisa seeks the attention of her husband, Cathy longs for the companionship of a gentleman; however, when both women are forced to deal directly with death, their selfish preoccupations are trivialized and the significance of human life and mortality is illuminated.

In "New Dresses," [1] the protagonist stumbles into her enlightenment as she progresses through a shopping excursion with her mother-in-law, Mrs. Worthy. Lisa, a northern girl, marries into a southern family but harbors feelings of resentment and jealousy towards her elderly mother-in-law. Brown compares Mrs. Worthy and Lisa, who, although different in age and circumstance, experience similar feelings of loneliness and abandonment. As the story begins, Lisa takes her mother-in-law, Mrs. Worthy, out to look for a new dress. While the story develops around the shopping excursion, it is written in the third-person limited perspective, giving the reader access to only Lisa's thoughts and feelings. As a result, the narrator reveals Lisa's frustration and her subsequent loneliness in a community of seemingly unforgiving strangers. After marrying her husband, Lisa reveals that she gives up a part of her own identity as she

[1] First published in the Spring of 1986 in the literary magazine Ploughshares, the story appeared in 1988 with the title "One Regret" in the magazine Redbook after it was published in Brown's first collection Tongues of Flame.

tries to assimilate into the southern culture and into the Worthy family. As Lisa slowly reveals her feelings regarding the town, her marriage, and Mrs. Worthy, the reader is able to classify Lisa's feelings as a consequence of her loneliness and separation from the familiar. Lisa is jealous of Mrs. Worthy, her esteem within the town, and her relationship with David, Lisa's husband. As the story progresses, Brown displays the conflicting personalities of Mrs. Worthy and Lisa, ultimately contrasting the lives of the two women and then, in the end, showing their similarities.

When Mrs. Worthy decides she wants to buy a new dress, Lisa offers to take her shopping because Lisa wants to "redeem herself" for her past behavior towards the ailing Mrs. Worthy. In the first paragraph, the reader is introduced to Lisa, Mrs. Worthy, and Mrs. Worthy's nurse, Mrs. Lovelady. Immediately, Brown emphasizes the distance between Lisa and her mother-in-law. As Mrs. Lovelady helps Mrs. Worthy into Lisa's car, Brown vividly describes the uncomfortable tension between Mrs. Lovelady and Lisa. As Mrs.Worthy struggles to get inside Lisa's vehicle, Lisa realizes that she should have listened to her husband's requests and brought a different car for the outing. Right away, Lisa's insensitivity is illuminated, and it becomes obvious that she is inept when dealing with her mother-in-law. The reader abruptly becomes aware of Lisa's recalcitrance as she "could only stand by and watch" (Brown, Tongues 1). Instead of offering to help, Lisa simply stands apart from the scene and watches as her mother-in-law struggles to get into the car. It becomes evident from Mrs. Lovelady's reaction that she neither likes nor trusts Lisa: "Mrs. Lovelady kept smiling, for Mrs. Worthy's sake. Her eyes froze over when she looked at Lisa" (Brown, Tongues 1). Therefore, when Mrs. Lovelady subtly

expresses her disapproval, she subsequently reveals the first feelings of animosity towards Lisa and sets the tone for the entire story.

While Mrs. Lovelady's reaction exhibits her apprehension, it is important to note the significance of the names "Mrs. Lovelady" and "Mrs. Worthy." Brown's deliberate choice of character names adds depth and richness to the text as the names accentuate the scenario that develops around the main characters. Thus, the characters' names are symbolic of the characters' roles within Brown's story. By choosing the name "Lovelady," Brown slowly forms an alliance between Lovelady and her employer, Mrs. Worthy. The name "Lovelady" is an appropriate name for this character because of her role as Mrs. Worthy's nurse and because she does, indeed, love Mrs. Worthy. While Mrs. Lovelady's devotion to Mrs. Worthy is expressed through her obvious concern for Mrs. Worthy's well-being, concern is also displayed by several other characters throughout the story. Excluding Lisa, every character in Brown's story shows a genuine concern and love for Mrs. Worthy. While Mrs. Lovelady's name appears to represent her love and devotion to the lady of the story, the name "Mrs. Worthy" is also significant because the name implies that Mrs. Worthy is, in fact, worthy of the praise and is essentially a worthy character, especially when compared to her daughter-in-law, Lisa.

Lisa, the younger female character, is an outsider living in the South. As a northerner in a southern town, Lisa finds herself unable to live up to the southern standard of how a wife and a daughter-in-law should act. The townspeople of Wakefield recognize Lisa as an outsider and note: "When, in eight years, she had played no bridge, produced no child, joined no clique or club, they gave up on her. She was simply David

Worthy's wife, 'a girl from up north somewhere'" (Brown, Tongues 7). Lisa's status as an outsider places her on the defensive, and subsequently, she scrutinizes her own behavior, noting that her actions are, more than likely, being critiqued. Brown conveys Lisa's discomfort and discontent throughout the story as Lisa's internal commentary demonstrates her own insecurities about the perceptions of others. While acutely aware of other's perceptions, Lisa feels compelled to defend her position as David's wife. Thus, the readers discover that Lisa is aware of her feelings and is ready to defend her position if ever given the opportunity. Forced to live and carry on the family business with her husband, Lisa shows her discontent when she states:

> Sometimes at night, in the poster bed from David's old bedroom, the whole thing seemed more dream than reality—the Deep South like a foreign country, the Worthys with their contradictory piety and pride, the big house that was more than a house. Sometimes even David, behind the façade of manners and codes. Everything but the store where, surrounded by accounts and figures, she felt at home. (Brown, Tongues 8)

As both characters experience a separation from society, the story draws a parallel between the loneliness of the elderly Mrs. Worthy and the outsider Lisa. Lisa feels that her life with her husband David is ultimately second to his life and connection with his mother. Although the reader is left to speculate about Mrs. Worthy's feelings, it becomes apparent through her actions that she feels her own sense of separation from the world. Dying and unable to care for herself, Mrs. Worthy must constantly rely on the aid of other people. While Mrs. Worthy has the admiration and respect of the townspeople, she

must ultimately face death alone; therefore, both Mrs. Worthy and Lisa are two individuals who, although physically surrounded by people, are lonely and isolated.

As Lisa struggles to find her place in the town and her husband's family, she demonstrates her frustration and bitterness when she feels a sudden onslaught of guilt as she yearns for her Catholic rosary and missal: "She would hunt them up and use them. No one would know, and what if they did? At the thought, guilt gave way to resentment, toward what or whom she didn't even know" (Brown, Tongues 12). As Lisa tries to assimilate into the Southern culture, she not only gives up her religion but also a part of her identity. This loss of identity, coupled with her feelings of insecurity in her marriage, stimulates her feelings of resentment towards her husband and his mother. When Lisa becomes frustrated with David's behavior toward his mother, David explains to Lisa "But she's alone now and she's my mother! [...] I love you both. Don't you know that?" (Brown, Tongues 5). In response, Lisa's internal reflection reveals, "She didn't care about both. It was not to be shared. Something inside her was always watching for, ready to resist, any such notion on anyone's part" (Brown, Tongues 5). Immediately, Brown builds a divisive line between the world of Lisa and that of Mrs. Worthy.

The reader realizes Lisa's disdain when, at the beginning of the story, it is revealed that "For weeks, Lisa had neglected, to the point of ignoring, her sick mother-in-law, but with an excuse that could pass for a reason" (Brown, Tongues 3). However, Brown builds compassion for Mrs. Worthy as the readers see the extent of her sickness. Through the revelations of the townspeople, Brown demonstrates Mrs. Worthy's descent from prominent member of society to an alone, elderly woman dependent on the care of

others. Lisa, unable to see beyond her own selfish misconceptions, resents the concern exhibited by the townspeople for her mother-in-law. Lisa believes that while the townspeople express sympathy for her mother-in-law, they are, at the same time, critical of her own disregard and disinterest in Mrs. Worthy. While Lisa's assumptions might be true, her insecurity also reveals her guilty conscience. The dresses become the medium through which Brown is able to compare and contrast the two women. While both women appear to suffer from loneliness, Lisa's loneliness and sorrow are of little consequence when compared to Mrs. Worthy's looming death.

When Lisa takes Mrs. Worthy to her favorite store, Hagedorn's, Lisa leaves and goes to another store to do her own shopping. Unexpectedly, Lisa's favorite store, Lowe's, has a dress on display that she had seen and admired in a magazine. Captivated by the dress, Lisa decides to try it on, and when Lisa steps out of the dressing room, a woman smoking a cigarette tells her, "That dress is out of this world on you" (Brown, Tongues 11). As Lisa looks at herself in the mirror, the woman comments on the dress, and the narrator reveals the detail of ashes falling onto the woman's gray shoes: "Ashes fell on her gray shoes like suede on suede" (Brown, Tongues 11). After purchasing the dress, Lisa realizes that she is running late and quickly returns to Hagedorn's to pick up Mrs. Worthy. When Lisa rushes in, she finds Mrs. Worthy "asleep on the sofa, her chin on her chest, her hat askew. Beside her was a pearl-gray dress box" (Brown, Tongues 12). Here, Brown uses the color gray to establish a parallel between the two characters and their separate shopping experiences. According to J. C. Cooper in her book An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols, the color gray represents, "mourning;

depression, ashes, penitence," and more specifically from the Christian perspective, the color gray symbolizes the "death of the body and immortality of the soul" (40). As the experiences of both characters are marked by the repetition of the color gray, the color captures the somber tone of the story and the morose emotional state of Lisa.

When Lisa arrives at Hagedorn's and finds Mrs. Worthy asleep on the sofa, her feelings of contempt are directed toward her mother-in-law as she wonders, "what vanity or pride could prompt anyone so sick to subject herself, subject them all, to such an ordeal" (Brown, Tongues 13). Although she feels somewhat guilty for her selfish behavior, Lisa is unable to apologize to Mrs. Worthy. Ironically, just as Lisa feels abandoned by David, Lisa literally abandons Mrs. Worthy in the clothing store. While Lisa wants to depend on her husband for support, Mrs. Worthy looks to Lisa for support and care on this particular afternoon, yet both Lisa and her husband fail miserably.

Upon arriving home, Lisa asks to see Mrs. Worthy's purchase. Details conveyed throughout the story all become extremely relevant when Lisa asks about Mrs. Worthy's dress. As Lisa sees the dress, her feelings of anger and jealousy all subside when she discovers that Mrs. Worthy, to Lisa's surprise, is buying her burial dress. When Lisa comments on the dress, Mrs. Worthy states, "We used to call that color 'ashes of roses'" (Brown, Tongues 16). This slight detail adds a unity to the text because, again, both Mrs. Worthy's dress and Lisa's dress are connected by similar textual imagery of the color gray. The color "ashes of roses" reminds the reader of Lisa's shopping experience and the woman who, while dropping ashes on her gray shoes, comments that Lisa looks "out of this world" (Brown, Tongues 11). When Mrs. Worthy describes the color to Lisa, she

"gave a quick light laugh" and "humor flared up in her eyes like small flames" (Brown, Tongues 16). The humor is Mrs. Worthy's way of alluding to the irony of the situation since her body will literally turn to ashes after it has been buried. In this case, the connection between the fallen ashes of the cigarette and Mrs. Worthy's dress is indeed deliberate and significant. Like the ashes that fall from the cigarette and become indistinguishable, so too will Mrs. Worthy—reduced to pile of ashes. Lisa's contemptuous feelings become insignificant as both the readers and Lisa discover the motivation for Mrs. Worthy's outing. Just as Lisa looked "out of this world" (Brown, Tongues 11) in her dress, Mrs. Worthy's dress is actually going to go with her out of this world. Overall, the two dresses are symbolic of the women, their assumed differences, coupled with their similar desires for attention, love, and compassion.

While Brown builds the story around Lisa's perspective and her perceived loneliness and abandonment, ultimately Lisa's problems are overshadowed by human mortality as her struggles with identity and abandonment become inconsequential. Finally, Lisa sees her mother-in-law differently when she responds to her personal revelation with a disconcerting silence: "Unable to respond, as in a nightmare, she went on staring at her mother-in-law as if she'd never seen her before, as if what she saw was not a face but a revelation, not to be taken in all at once, in the blinking of an eye" (Brown, Tongues 16). Suddenly, Lisa's problems become trivialized in the light of Mrs. Worthy's impending death. For Lisa, the disclosure that occurs forces her to reevaluate her own pain and compels her to reconsider her tribulations, especially when contrasted to the position of her mother-in-law. While the story focuses on Lisa's pain and her

apparent competition with her mother-in-law for her husband's affection, the story's conclusion makes Lisa's struggle appear trite and inconsequential. Whereas Lisa appears to be battling the town, Mrs. Worthy, and her own guilt, Mrs. Worthy's opponent is death. Ultimately, in the story's conclusion, Brown demonstrates how the trivialities of life become irrelevant in the face of certain death.

Like the character Lisa in "New Dresses," the protagonist, Cathy, in "Alone in a Foreign Country" also experiences similar feelings of loneliness and isolation.[2] While on a trip to Moscow, Cathy barricades herself in her room one evening after she convinces herself that someone is trying to break into her hotel room. Awakened in the night by a rattling sound, Cathy, alone and frightened, forces herself to confront death when she prepares herself to be attacked by an intruder in the night. Although Cathy eventually discovers that her rattling door is the result of a draft, she is forever affected by her experiences that evening. After Cathy spends the entire evening contemplating her own death, the next morning she realizes that "Death had to be the root, the taproot, of fears" (Brown, It Wasn't 97). Through Cathy's coming to terms with her mortality, Brown's story explores the fragile humanity and fate of all people, regardless of situation.

Out of all of Brown's stories, "Alone in a Foreign Country" is the only story that is not set in the South. In an interview with Susie Paul, Brown notes that few people ever ask her about "Alone in a Foreign Country," even though it is one of her more distinctive stories. Brown claims that the impetus for the story came from her own experience when she traveled to Russia and was, like Cathy, frightened in her hotel room. Thus,

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[2] While "Alone in a Foreign Country" appears in Brown's It Wasn't All Dancing, the story first appeared in 1998 in the literary magazine Five Points with the title "In a Foreign Country."

Brown reveals that "Alone in a Foreign Country" is "about a young woman's realization of her mortality. She doesn't realize it when she's scared to death, but now she will, that some time she will have to die. She hasn't thought about that before. The recognition is so overpowering, she is just overwhelmed" (qtd. in Paul 4). Like the character Lisa, Cathy in "Alone in a Foreign Country" has a sudden epiphany regarding the importance of life when she unexpectedly finds herself feeling both vulnerable and completely alone.

While the story begins in Cathy's room, Brown provides the reader with important information regarding Cathy and her motivations for taking a trip to Moscow. Like Lisa in "New Dresses," Cathy is an outsider in a foreign country, yet while she does not experience direct hostility from the Russians, the setting in "Alone in A Foreign Country" establishes a similar tone of discomfort and isolation. Brown reveals early in the story that Cathy, a girl from the South, is not just physically alone in her room, but also alone in life and is hoping to find a possible husband on her trip. By describing Cathy's intentions, Brown, therefore, sets Cathy apart from the other members of her traveling group since she is not motivated by scholarly interests but rather social interests. Thus, it becomes evident that Cathy is someone sensitive to her status as a single woman and, as a result, is actively trying to find an appropriate companion.

Cathy's anxiety grows as she mistakenly assumes that someone is trying to break into her hotel room. Thus, Cathy imagines an entire scenario in her mind that climaxes with her eventual death. Trying to maintain a level of dignity but terrified for her life, Cathy presumes that "She couldn't scream for help over here, not in the middle of the night. Naturally shy, then baptized in Southern manners, she'd never caused a

disturbance anywhere in her life" (Brown, It Wasn't 94). Although scared, Cathy remains silent, creating the majority of the story's conflict within her mind. Like Brown's character Lisa Worthy, Cathy appears silent throughout the majority of the story, keeping an active internal monologue, and like Lisa, she does not verbalize her problems. While Lisa never discusses her feelings with Mrs. Worthy and only once reveals her feelings to David, so too does Cathy remain silent, never calling for help. As a result of their silent behaviors, both characters' internal conflicts are much worse than the reality presented.

As the night passes, Cathy begins to assume that the person pursuing her is actually a male: "Whoever was there would get in, she was sure. He'd have tools as well as keys, and would try until something worked" (Brown, It Wasn't 95). This assumption of gender establishes that Cathy not only feels vulnerable to the opposite sex, but also wants to feel pursued by the opposite sex. In fact, Cathy has continually admitted her dependence on the male sex. First, her impetus for embarking on this trip was to find a male companion, and second, throughout the story, Cathy frequently refers to the words of her father, reiterating the importance of a strong male voice in her life. Lastly, although she does not immediately heed her father's suggestions, Cathy reprimands herself for not submitting to his warnings when she reveals that "If she'd listened to her Daddy she wouldn't be here, she thought. He'd opposed this trip from the start" (Brown, It Wasn't 95). However, because Cathy is alone and facing a threatening situation, she is able to determine that her frivolous desires of companionship are somewhat inconsequential when facing death. As she sits in her room, panic stricken and mortified,

Cathy reaches a turning point. When she begins to think about the possibility of rape, Cathy states that "It would ruin her whole life and her dreams. She'd never get over it even if she lived, so she'd fight to the end. He'd have to kill her" (Brown, It Wasn't 95). Suddenly, as Cathy realizes that her dreams of a perfect married life are not worth her own mortality, she reveals that "she didn't want to die. She wasn't ready! She'd been like a flower by the roadside or a leaf on a tree, not realizing she was living any more than they did" (Brown, It Wasn't 95). At this point, Cathy realizes that the limitations she has placed upon herself have been trivial and unimportant. While once concerned with appearances and finding the right companion, Cathy now discovers that death is really the only thing she needs to fear because everything else is inconsequential. While Cathy is initially concerned about her dreams, the situation in the hotel room forces her to deal with reality and the most absolute aspect of reality—death. Just as Lisa, after realizing the reality of Mrs. Worthy's impending death, grasps the foolishness of her own problems and complaints, so too does Cathy grasp the imprudence of her own previous concerns. When Cathy discovers that the rattling door is simply a breeze from an overhead transom, she finally sleeps after admitting that "sometime, somewhere, her time would come" (Brown, It Wasn't 97). Until her trip to Moscow, Cathy admits that she has never previously concerned herself with the idea of death or human mortality. However, when placed in an unfamiliar environment, Cathy is forced to reevaluate her life as she discovers that instead of worrying about a husband, she should instead be worrying about death and the fragility of human life.

The next morning, when Cathy finally reunites with her tour group, she suddenly discovers that her experience in her room will forever change her perspective of life and living. Once preoccupied with finding the perfect spouse, Cathy has now focused all of her attention on death and the inevitability of her fate. Concerned and still shaken from the previous evening of unrest, Cathy asks her fellow traveler Beverly if she has ever faced death. Beverly, unwilling to direct her thoughts toward anything so morose, refuses to listen to Cathy's comments about her encounter with death. Instead, Beverly faces the opposite direction, "way up front with the tour guide, facing the other way" (Brown, It Wasn't 100). Here, Brown uses the separate images of Cathy and Beverly to highlight the different ways people, in general, deal with death. While Beverly chooses to ignore the obvious, Cathy, after confronting her own version of death, is unable to forget the presence of death in her life. Suddenly, Cathy has become a more serious, thoughtful character.

In both "New Dresses" and "Alone in a Foreign Country," Brown explores the vulnerability of characters in a foreign setting. Protagonists Lisa and Cathy both experience intense emotions of loneliness and isolation as both females struggle to find their places in unwelcoming environments. While Lisa struggles to find acceptance in her husband's hometown, Cathy desires male companionship, and in her search for love, finds herself far from home and confronting new issues. Lisa and Cathy are similar in several ways and, in both stories, are discovering their own faults and misconceptions regarding life and those around them. Once troubled by frivolous details, Cathy and Lisa

are changed people after they are both forced to move beyond their trivial preoccupations and confront human mortality.

CHAPTER III

In her writing, Brown often explores the dichotomy of race relations in the South and the varying degrees of friendship that occur between Caucasians and African Americans. In three of her pieces, Brown does a remarkable job describing both the heartwarming friendships and the vast separation that exist between two sets of people from different cultures. The main characters in Brown's work "Swing Low: A Memoir," "The Cure," and "Beyond New Forks" display the various types of friendships that occurred and still occur between people of different races in the South. While "Beyond New Forks" and "The Cure" are fictional, the subject for "Swing Low: A Memoir" is taken from her own life and documents the stirring friendship her mother shared with a house servant named William. While "Swing Low: A Memoir" is the only narrative credited as factual, all three selections describe cross-cultural friendships in the South and the unique relationship that occurs when two people hail from different backgrounds. In these interracial friendships, differences either become emphasized or ignored.

In an article for People magazine, writer Peggy Brawley notes, "She [Brown] writes of ordinary folks, black and white, caught in commonplace dilemmas, with a clarity that makes them startlingly real" (85). Such is the case in Brown's story "The Cure" when two seemingly opposite characters suddenly form a brief companionship that

demonstrates that old age does not discriminate.[3] While the story deals specifically with an elderly black woman and an aging racist male doctor, the story moves beyond racism as it emphasizes the shared human experience of aging and death. J. E. Brown states, "The story is so free of political bias that an agent for the Soviet/American Joint Editorial Board of the Quaker US/USSR Committee, which edited the anthology, contacted Mary Ward Brown and asked if she were black or white" (xvi-xvii). Certainly, the story captures Brown's ability to write from diverse perspectives as she portrays both the dialogue and the way of life for her black characters, but the story goes even further into the human condition as it demonstrates the irrelevance of race when two elderly characters from different backgrounds find brief respite in each other's company.

As the story begins, Ella Hogue is believed to be on the verge of death. When she makes a sudden recovery, her first wish is to see her former doctor, Dr. Dobbs, an aging alcoholic who continues to preserve the once common racist views of the pre-1950s. Although Dr. Dobbs is retired, Ella insists on his help. The story explores the comfort of familiarity and the inevitability of change as the two elderly characters appear uncomfortable with the onset of social progression. While specific familial and social elements within the story remain steadfast for Ella, the story explores how social change and old age coincide and cause Ella to crave the images of her past. The overriding themes of social change are expressed throughout the story as the two elderly characters

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[3] Aside from the story's appearance in the collection Tongues of Flame, "The Cure" has appeared in three other publications, in the journal Ascent in 1983, in the yearly anthology Best American Short Stories: 1984, and in an anthology entitled The Human Experience: Contemporary American and Soviet Fiction and Poetry in 1989. The inclusion of "The Cure" in The Human Experience: Contemporary American and Soviet Fiction and Poetry is especially significant because it attests to the universality of Brown's message.

exhibit the characteristics of a dying generation and a past way of life. As the story progresses, Brown builds the emerging conflict between old and new when the narrator of the story refers to Ella's determination: "Ella had hung on, puttering around her house and yard, last not only of her generation but of a whole era" (Brown, Tongues 21). Instead of stating that Ella persisted or endured, the narrator describes Ella as merely hanging on, suggesting that she is grabbing onto something that is fading or moving away. In Ella's case, she is not only hanging on to her existence but also to a dying way of life.

While Ella insists on seeing her old doctor, Ella's children, Bee, Andretta, and Lucindy, respond to their mother's chiding as if they were young children being disciplined. However, while the dialogue between mother and child remains the same, Ella's children are now in the position of caretakers and are now forced to claim responsibility over their mother's care. Therefore, as Ella gains consciousness, the reader slowly discovers the burden carried by Ella's children and Sally, Ella's former employer and owner of the property where Ella resides.

The relationship between Ella and Sally captures the changing relationship between whites and blacks after the Civil Rights Era. Ella, a vestige of the past, symbolizes the segment of the black population that was caught in the years of transition. Unable to retain her past way of life and unfamiliar with and somewhat unwelcome in the present, Ella continues to live her life on her previous employer's land. In contrast with Ella, the character Sally represents the segment of the white population that, after the 1950s, tried to progress but struggled to fulfill their familial obligations to the families

that had worked for them. Because the story takes place after Civil Rights, Sally reluctantly maintains an air of superiority as Ella willingly places Sally in an authoritative position. The story carefully explores the somewhat confused social hierarchy that existed between whites and blacks after the fight for equal rights. An example of this distorted hierarchy occurs when, as soon as Ella awakes from her coma, one of the first questions she asks is "Has Doll [Sally] been here?" (Brown, Tongues 19). In response to Ella's question, the story reveals that Lucindy "proudly" responds, "Every day" (Brown, Tongues 19). The word "proudly" suggests that perhaps there is an air of assumed pride for Ella and her daughters because Sally, a white woman, willingly chooses to visit their family. As the story proceeds, Brown indicates that Sally is closely involved in Ella's treatment, even, at one point, ordering Ella to receive medical care; however, while revealing Sally's involvement, Brown alludes to Sally's reluctance and growing despondency with her role as Ella's assumed superior and provider.

The relationship between Ella and Sally is close but fostered out of familiarity as Sally continues to feel responsible for Ella because of their shared past and because Ella continues to live on Sally's farm. Thus, for Sally, her relationship with Ella is marked by an assumed responsibility and perhaps guilt. Caught between pre-and post-Civil Rights, Ella lives on Sally's farm because it is the only home she has ever known. When Ella becomes ill, Sally admits that "though she dreaded Ella's passing with all her conscious mind, Sally was dimly aware of a subterranean impatience to get it over and behind her, for things to get back to normal, whatever the cost" (Brown, Tongues 21). Here, in this line, Brown captures the guilt, responsibility, and the burden felt by the younger white

generation to both fulfill and complete their roles as landowners and bosses. However, in this same line there is an underlying tone of selfishness that goes beyond race. Again, this story moves beyond racial issues as Brown discusses and dissects the burden placed upon the younger generation when the elderly become dependent and are incapable of surviving on their own. Sally's growing impatience to "get it over and behind her" is also mimicked by Ella's own children who, at the end of the story, suddenly realize that "her [Ella's] living would be costly from now on" (Brown, Tongues 31). Thus, Ella is not only a burden to the white landowner but also to her own children.

When Lucindy brings Sally the news of Ella's recovery, the narrator reveals Lucindy's discontent: "On the underside of the announcement, like an insect behind a sheer curtain, was a hint of disappointment" (Brown, Tongues 22). In this line, Brown's simile that compares Lucindy's disappointment to "an insect behind a sheer curtain" conveys both Ella's daughter's feelings of entrapment and also Sally's inability to escape from the past that both captures and smothers her. This brief meeting between Lucindy and Sally symbolizes the mutuality of their feelings and the anxiety felt by all those involved in Ella's care. For Lucindy, she is a trapped insect, and the curtain represents her responsibility as a daughter, a responsibility that forces her to be her mother's caretaker. In contrast, Sally is also like an insect trapped behind a curtain except for Sally, the curtain represents the oppressive past that confines her to be both caretaker and master and thus keeps her attached to her elderly, black servant, Ella.

While the relationship between Ella and Sally represents the social confusion that occurs after Civil Rights for both whites and blacks, the relationship between Dr. Dobbs

and Ella demonstrates the irrelevance of race and social position when two people find a common ground and are facing similar circumstances. Dobbs, like Ella, is a vestige of the past. While Ella represents the elderly segment of the black population who struggles to find a place in society, Dobbs represents the elderly segment of the white population who continues to cling to the ideals of the South before integration. Just as Ella clings to the social hierarchy that places her white mistress in an authoritative position, Dobbs, throughout the story, unabashedly reveals his racist views that align him to a previous way of life. Upon his arrival at Sally's farm, Dr. Dobbs asks Sally, "Where's all the niggers?" (Brown, Tongues 24). This comment immediately dates Dobbs and demonstrates his attachment to an earlier time. The question also reveals Dobbs' denial of the present and demonstrates his defiance and reluctance to accept the social changes that have obviously occurred in his environment. Also, it is significant to note that Dobbs freely uses the term "nigger" in front of his black servant. Unwilling to censor or change his language, Dobbs demonstrates his assumed superiority over his black helper. When Sally tells the doctor that the majority of the black workers have moved off the farm, he responds by stating, " 'Good riddance,'[...] 'I wish they'd all leave—go back to Africa. Except Bojangles, here. Wadn't for him, I'd be up the creek without a paddle" (Brown, Tongues 24). When Dobbs freely uses a racial slur, he demonstrates his assumed social superiority over his black employee as he neither hesitates nor apologizes for his crudity or incivility. Instead, he openly uses the term and fears no repercussions for his words. He further demonstrates his superiority when he deliberately calls his servant "Bojangles" instead of calling him by his real name, Elmo, a detail that only

further establishes Dobbs as a man steeped in the traditions of the old South. Stemming from the popular tap dancer, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, "Bojangles" reiterates Dr. Dobbs' refusal to accept the true identity of his employee, Elmo, further establishing Dobbs as an insensitive racist who assumes himself to be superior to any person of color.

Upon this introduction of Dobbs, the reader assumes that his visit with Ella will be an uncomfortable meeting, simply because of his racist views. However, Brown defies the assumptions of her readers when she poignantly shows how two opposite characters can suddenly find a common ground. In the case of Dr. Dobbs and Ella, both characters are members of the same dying generation, a generation that ironically positions Dr. Dobbs and Ella in different social strata. As a white male, Dobbs has lived most of his life at the top of the social hierarchy, and in contrast, Ella has lived the majority of her life at the bottom of the hierarchy as a black servant. When the two characters encounter each other, Dobbs is a retired drunk whose only companion in life is his black servant. Unlike the doctor who has no one but a paid servant, Ella, in her old age, is surrounded by her children. Thus, while Dobbs was once envied for his position and social status, now Ella's position in the final stages of her life appears to be somewhat more enviable than Dobbs' position because, unlike Dobbs, Ella is not alone. However, while the two characters lead different lives, upon their current meeting, both characters step outside of their skin and share the bond of human mortality. Living on opposite ends of the social spectrum, the two unexpectedly connect when Ella requests Dr. Dobbs as a physician.

When Dobbs walks into the room to examine Ella, his cordial greeting and pleasant bedside manner appear to betray his demeanor demonstrated earlier in the story. However, as the examination takes place, Brown emphasizes the vulnerability of Dr. Dobbs when he is forced to call Elmo in for help, "Elmo came forward to pull him up by the arms like a monstrous baby. [...]Elmo stood behind the doctor, reached beneath his coat, and gripped his belt firmly" (Brown, Tongues 26). In this line, Brown forces her readers to see the hypocrisy of Dobbs' racism by witnessing his steadfast reliance on a black man. In essence, the vulnerability of Dobbs' character slowly becomes evident, and Dobbs concludes the examination by telling Ella, "What you've got Auntie, [...] is the same thing I've got—old age. There ain't but one cure for it" (Brown, Tongues 27). The cure that Dobbs refers to is death, and while Dobbs is unable to cure Ella, he does, however, share some of his own anguish with her when he deliberately draws a parallel between their two situations. When Ella tells Dr. Dobbs, "I don't want to be a burden on nobody," he responds by stating "That's what we all say" (Brown, Tongues 27). This line in the story marks a turning point for the doctor. In this one line, he disregards the years of racial division that have previously separated himself from Ella when he compares his own plight to the plight of an elderly black lady. At this moment in the story, Dobbs and Ella are two humans joined by their own fears. When Dobbs uses the pronoun "we," he brings himself and Ella together and allows his racist views to lapse.

When Dobbs proceeds to write Ella a prescription, her comments strike a familiar tone with the doctor as he suddenly recollects his previous visits with her. Suddenly, Dobbs asks Ella, "Ain't you the one used to make that good muscadine wine?" (Brown,

Tongues 27). In response, "Ella's eyes gleamed in the lamplight" (Tongues 27). At this moment, Ella suddenly appears enthusiastic and more animated. The gleam that appears in Ella's eyes exhibits an improvement in mood and appearance, especially when contrasted with a preceding passage that describes her face as "stoical and lonely" (Brown, Tongues 22). Excited to be remembered and longing for additional company, Ella eagerly shares her wine with Dobbs. As the two characters drink Ella's homemade wine, Ella's motivation for calling Dr. Dobbs becomes evident. Although she is suffering, Ella calls Dobbs because she wants to share a moment with someone who understands her sadness and her past. Indeed, Dobbs appears briefly to cast aside his racist views in an effort to alleviate both his and his patient's pain. Brown delicately alludes to Dobbs' abrupt revelation when Dobbs calls out to Ella's daughters, "'Hey girl!' he called out, making his stomach heave. 'One of you...ladies!" (Brown, Tongues 28). In this line, Brown's careful craftsmanship of the dialogue shows the readers that Dobbs' previous tone has changed and Dobbs has experienced a shift in perception. Brown's usage of the ellipsis demonstrates a pause in Dobbs' speech and notes his consciousness about his audience. The ellipsis reveals that Dobbs censors himself before he uses another racial slur. This deliberate refrain by Dobbs marks his change and demonstrates his fondness for Ella, a fondness born out of mutual regard. Just as Ella craves the companionship of someone her own age, so too does Dobbs, and Dobbs can relate to Ella because he too knows what it is like to grow old and become dependent on others.

Overall, both Dobbs and Ella represent a dying generation and a passing way of life. As the two characters share the wine, they also empathize with each other because,

although the two are separated by race and gender, both are joined in their shared humanity and mortality. Ella, a woman steeped in the past, refuses to see a new doctor and insists on seeing Dr. Dobbs because she knows that no other doctor is familiar with the ways of the past and no other doctor would be willing to sit down and share a glass of wine with her. Indeed, the most astonishing event that occurs in this story is the momentary communion that occurs between an arrogant racist and his black patient.

In an interview with Jim Lawley for the Decatur Daily, Brown comments on her experience as an editor for The Marion Times: "The editor had a drinking problem, and when he had to 'go take the cure' he'd be gone for a month, so I'd do the paper while he was gone" (par. 10). Thus, in Brown's story "The Cure," Brown contorts this idea of alcohol as "the cure" when she has her two main characters, Ella and Dobbs, form a brief companionship over a bottle of wine. For Dobbs and Ella, however, the cure is much more than just alcohol. Instead, the title of the story "The Cure" refers to death—the only cure for old age. For Ella and Dobbs, Ella's muscadine wine is not the cure, but instead the wine serves as the vehicle through which both individuals are able to sit down and momentarily empathize with each other's struggle with old age. Unable to prescribe Ella the only known cure, Dobbs' company provides Ella with a brief reprieve as she suddenly finds someone who understands her condition.

As Dobbs and Ella share each other's company, Ella's daughters are thinking about the burden they are about to inherit. While the story comments on the division between the races, the story also explores the division that exists between the younger generations and the elderly. Essentially, Brown uses the theme of racism and

underscores its significance by demonstrating the inconsequentiality of such a divisive tradition when one faces old age and death. While the character Dobbs appears to be deplorable, he briefly redeems himself when he befriends Ella and thus regains a modicum of sympathy from Brown's readers. Conversely, while Dobbs achieves a diminutive amount of clemency, the last line of the story suggests that Ella's sudden recovery is a significant burden rather than a blessing for her daughters. The burden of age, not race, becomes an important theme of this story when, in the final line, "Like actors on a stage, they waited for the old man to call out and let the ending begin" (31). The "ending" not only refers to the end of Ella's life, but also to the end of her daughters' lives as they suddenly realize the sacrifices they must make in order to continue caring for their aging mother. Thus, the story serves a duel purpose. First, "The Cure" captures the complexities of southern society during the post Civil Rights era as the characters demonstrate the general need for human compassion and the ability to overlook even the most deeply embedded perceptions. Second, Brown's story comments on the burden of age upon both the individual and upon the younger generation. As both the older and the younger generations become aware of the burden, both groups reluctantly accept the inevitability of change as they each move into another phase of life.

While "The Cure" offers only a brief glimpse into the relationships one woman encounters towards the end of her life, Brown's semi-autobiographical narrative "Swing Low: A Memoir" documents the unique friendship that occurs between a woman and her

male house servant.[4] In The Remembered Gate, Brown provides her readers background information discussing her initial purpose in writing the story and reveals how the story came to fruition. Initially, "Swing Low" was written in an attempt to "preserve a few scenes, often talked about and laughed about on our farm, between my father and William Edwards, a black man on the place. The bond between William and my mother, however, took over and propelled it" (The Remembered Gate 39). Indeed, Brown's final version of "Swing Low" is driven by the unique bond that forms between Brown's mother and her housekeeper William. Brown goes on to state that the story was written for her son and his family and was an attempt to introduce them to their heritage and show them what life was like for her growing up. However, while the story captures a personal memory for Brown, it also captures a part of southern history. In her book, The Christ-haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction, Susan Ketchin writes, "Mary Ward Brown was once asked why she wrote about race and religion so often in her fiction. She answered, 'These are the overriding preoccupations of the South, of where I've lived all my life" (304). Thus, Brown's story "Swing Low" captures a part of Brown's past and shows life before Civil Rights as she documents the deeply personal and tender relationship that occurred during a time that was marked by racial stratification. Brown notes:

> Now in 2000 both races are silent about the way things were at the time of this remembrance. Black people, programmed by circumstance into the roles they had to play, would probably rather not look back. White people, especially those of

[4] The story has appeared in two separate publications, Tongues of Flame and The Remembered Gate: Memoirs by Alabama Writers.

> good intentions who accepted the status quo without moral questioning, are inclined to feel a communal, if not personal guilt. (The Remembered Gate 40)

If, as Brown says, the "races are silent," then "Swing Low" offers a beautiful account of friendship during a time that most people assume to be a low point in southern history. However, Brown's story moves beyond the history books as she recounts the relationship that quietly occurs between members of two races that were frequently assumed to be adversaries during that time period. The story focuses on the human capacity for love and forgiveness and the significance of these traits when displayed in the unexpected friendship between a black servant and his female employer. In her preface to "Swing Low," Brown states, "I wrote this story/memoir before the silence set in. By now, relationships such as the ones memorialized here hardly seem authentic. Still, I didn't invent them. Nor could I ever forget them" (The Remembered Gate 40). Thus, Brown seems to answer all the questions that inevitably arise after reading the story. To most contemporary readers, the friendship that occurs between Brown's mother and her housekeeper William seems bizarre because history books tend to focus on the more dominant impressions of an age. However, Brown's story captures another dimension of southern life before the Civil Rights movement. Rather than focusing on the social hierarchy that placed white above black, Brown's story focuses on the human spirit and the unconditional love shared by two unconventional friends.

As "Swing Low" focuses on the friendship that arises between a white woman and her black housekeeper, Brown reveals the relationship to her readers through a series of anecdotes and illustrations. As in most relationships, the attachment that occurs

between William and Mrs. Ward develops over time, and Brown carefully uncovers the numerous tribulations that occur throughout William's tenure as housekeeper. Staying true to the tone of the time period, Brown gives her readers an uncensored glimpse into the relationship between boss and employee. The relationship between William and Mrs. Ward is not romanticized or embellished. In fact, as Brown slowly uncovers the bond between the two main characters, Brown also documents the existing inequalities of the time period through characterization and setting. In the first paragraph of the story, Brown writes:

> He [William] called my mother Miss, like all black people on the place, and she was his boss, though in a way they were workers together, since they had the same lord and master, my father. My mother called my father Mister Ward, which was customary in the rural tradition in which she was raised, but a large part of the deference seemed to be her own. (It Wasn't 79).

In these lines, Brown forms a parallel between Mrs. Ward and William. While Mrs. Ward is William's boss, she too must be submissive to another person—Mr. Ward. Brown's choice of the words "same lord and master" helps form a coalition between William and Mrs. Ward. However, the readers learn that, in fact, Mrs. Ward is more of a laborer than William after Brown reveals, "Though she was his boss, my mother worked longer and harder than William since she had two jobs" (It Wasn't 79). Immediately, the readers' sympathies begin to align with Mrs. Ward, especially when the story reveals that Edward frequently arrives for work "Half drunk or hung over" (Brown, It Wasn't 80). Brown provides the repartee that occurs between William and Mrs. Ward as they work

alongside each other, and William's gratitude is captured in several lines throughout the story. When Mrs. Ward compliments William by stating, "You do such good work when you try," William responds with gratitude when he states, "Well, you learnt me, [...] Wadn't for you, I'd be ignorant as everybody else on this place" (Brown, It Wasn't 82). Happy in his role as housekeeper, William is thankful for his job but willingly admits his faults. In fact, when the cook Joanna comments on William's fortune, William gratefully acquiesces and comments on the kindness of Mrs. Ward: "She got a tender heart, though, thank God" (Brown, It Wasn't 83). Just as William acknowledges Mrs. Ward's kindness, Mrs. Ward repeatedly excuses his weaknesses. When Mr. Ward comments on William's drinking habits, Mrs. Ward rationalizes William's behavior as best she can. Just as there is sincerity in the dialogue between Mrs. Ward and William, there is also a bond that connects the two characters. In fact, in several instances, Mrs. Ward deliberately disobeys her husband in an attempt to shield William from the wrath of Mr. Ward. This fact is particularly intriguing, especially since Brown describes her father as Mrs. Ward's "lord and master" (Brown, It Wasn't 79). Considering the social stratification of the time period, Mrs. Ward steps beyond the social boundaries that so frequently separated the races when she repeatedly defends William.

In essence, Mrs. Ward's concern for William moves beyond business as she demonstrates her growing compassion for an unlikely friend. When William is first found stealing liquor, Mr. Ward tells his wife to refrain from confronting William. Instead, Mrs. Ward disobeys her husband and directly questions William on the matter. This same pattern repeats itself when the Wards discover that William has stolen money

from Mrs. Ward's son. However, in this situation, William's betrayal of Mrs. Ward's trust is doubly significant since William not only compromises his friendship with Mrs. Ward but does so for another woman. Brown alludes to the fact that William steals the money in order to impress another woman when the cook Joanna reveals, "His gal was making a fool of him, [...] She didn't love him because he was too old and, besides, there was nothing to her. All she was, was gimme, gimme. He'd already given her everything he had, even some of the quilts pieced by his dead wife" (Brown, It Wasn't 85). Thus, William sacrifices the friendship and the trust Mrs. Ward bestows upon him for the attentions of another woman. In stealing the money, William places Mrs. Ward in a very difficult position with her husband, but unlike William, who betrays their friendship, Mrs. Ward refuses to forsake her friend. The most significant testament of Mrs. Ward's mercy is evident when even Joanna refuses to speak to William after he steals the money. In essence, William's only supporter and defender is a white woman whom he has repeatedly betrayed and let down. In order to save William and his position as housekeeper, Mrs. Ward literally pays for William's mistake when she uses her own egg money to replace the money he stole. Skeptical and untrusting of William, Mr. Ward questions the sensibility of Mrs. Ward's mercy. In response, she demonstrates her faith in William when she simply replies, "It won't happen again" (Brown, It Wasn't 87). Indeed, William's thievery ends after the incident, and he eventually settles down, devoting his life and his work to Mrs. Ward.

Soon after the theft, Brown describes a change in William, "He was in and out like a shadow, polite but distant, his face a mask" (Brown, It Wasn't 87). Here, William

goes through a significant change. Although grateful for Mrs. Ward's previous generosity, William is suddenly aware of the substance of their relationship. Disappointed in himself and humbled by her kindness, after the incident with the money, William realizes the genuineness of their friendship, and "changed for the better" and "was someone to depend on at last" (Brown, It Wasn't 87-88). As Mrs. Ward's health begins to deteriorate, the relationship between her and William becomes even more important as William supports her in her final days. Just as she has supported William throughout his life on the Ward farm, now William supports Mrs. Ward. Independent and strong willed throughout her life, Mrs. Ward is dependent on others when she becomes ill, but "she leaned most on William, who was always there" (It Wasn't 89). Finally, in these last months and days of her life, William is finally able to return the unconditional love that she so frequently bestowed upon him. Possessive and nurturing, William stays alongside Mrs. Ward throughout her illness. Just as she took responsibility for William, he, at the end of Mrs. Ward's life, takes responsibility for her, trying desperately to do anything for her in her final days. The true testament to their shared bond is apparent when Mrs. Ward briefly gains consciousness and hears William sobbing in the hall way. Mrs. Ward looks "curiously" at the faces of her family members but when she hears William crying in the hallway, she instantly calls out to him. In their last meeting, both friends grieve for each other's loss: "all that was left of her [Mrs. Ward] seemed to focus on his grief" (It Wasn't 90). When Mrs. Ward sees William crying, she states, "Poor William [...] Don't cry..." (Brown, It Wasn't 90). Thus, the same selflessness that marked their friendship in the beginning continues until the end as Mrs.

Ward, uncomfortable seeing William in pain, is forced to turn away from his grieving face as "she frowned, shut her eyes, and turned her head" (Brown, It Wasn't 90). William, unable to see Mrs. Ward buried, mourns the passing of his only true friend. When Mr. Ward tries to assuage William's sadness by telling William, "You got us" (Brown, It Wasn't 91), William responds by proclaiming that he does not have anybody to call a friend or even family. In these final lines, the readers finally see that Mrs. Ward is William's only true friend and that her death leaves him completely alone in life.

Set during a time when racial solidarity was so strongly emphasized, Brown's story contradicts history and the overall feeling of a time. The two main characters, William and Mrs. Ward, build a friendship based on human compassion and forgiveness. Race, although it plays a significant part in the social hierarchy of the time period, does not define either character. Instead, the relationship between William and Mrs. Ward is defined by one person's capacity for forgiveness and another person's willingness to change. The individuals are motivated by their feelings for each other, and although William repeatedly takes advantage of Mrs. Ward's generosity, he eventually discovers the significance of her trust and faith. The strength and kindness of Mrs. Ward are illuminated by William's selfishness, and in the end, he realizes and understands the sacrifices of Mrs. Ward and the validity of their relationship. Although raised in different cultures and backgrounds, both William and Mrs. Ward move beyond their socially defined roles as they each reach out to one another and establish a deeply moving and sincere friendship.

While the relationship between William and Mrs. Ward gradually develops into something deeply personal and sincere, the relationship between the narrator and Queen Esther in Mary Ward Brown's short story "Beyond New Forks"[5] is one that is built upon familiarity and the histories of previous generations. Like Brown's story "The Cure," "Beyond New Forks" describes both the separation and the closeness that exist between people of different races. Similar to "The Cure," the two main characters in "Beyond New Forks" are vestiges of the past and represent a fading era. Here, as in her previous story "The Cure," Brown juxtaposes the old and the new, showcasing the vast differences that separate the pre-and post-generations of Civil Rights. The story "Beyond New Forks" provides commentary on the disparate lifestyles of two women who, although they have grown up together, are separated by their race. The narrator of the story is a widowed woman who, in an effort to find a new maid, discovers that her world is very different from that of her old housemaid, Queen Esther. Although Brown never reveals the name of her narrator, the story is told from the first-person perspective, thus providing direct access into the rationale and motivations of the main character and narrator.

From the outset of the story, Brown juxtaposes both the separation and the closeness that exist between the narrator and Queen Esther. The social separation between the characters is first displayed when the narrator describes the scene in which Queen locks her house: "She [Queen] dropped the key into a patent-leather purse I had used and passed on to her" (Brown, Tongues 145). Here, in this understated detail of the hand-me-down purse, the readers instantly become aware of the narrator's somewhat

[5] The story not only appears in Brown's first collection of short stories, Tongues of Flame, but also originally appeared in the 1982 in the spring edition of The Threepenny Review.

paradoxical role as Queen's benefactor and friend. While she is generous enough to give Queen her old purse, the fact that she gives Queen her old, used item suggests that narrator is aware of her superior social status and is obviously better off than Queen. Just as important as the detail of the purse, the first spoken dialogue of each character also demonstrates the separation that exists between them. Trying to bridge the gap, the narrator tells Queen to ride in the passenger's seat in the front of the car, but Queen declines the offer with the excuse that she was "dipping snuff" and, thus, needs to sit in the backseat. Accustomed to this reaction from Queen, the narrator notes that Queen "had no intention of riding in the front seat with a white person, even me. Her mother had raised us both, me twenty years after Queen, and by the same rules. Now the rules had changed and I had changed, but not Queen" (Brown, Tongues 146). The simple dialogue with Queen and the internal revelations of the narrator capture the conflict of the story, and as the story progresses, the narrator appears to contradict her opening statements when the readers discover that the narrator, though not always able to recognize it, continues to cling to certain ideals of the past. While the narrator struggles to reach out to Queen and her family, her desire to hire Queen's granddaughter as a housemaid only exemplifies the narrator's desire to recapture the past. Thus, Brown contrasts both the disparity and the familiarity between the two women. While Ella and Dr. Dobbs in the story "The Cure" briefly find a common ground, the narrator and Queen Esther in "Beyond New Forks" are unable to fully empathize with each other because while they have always known each other, they are forever separated by their experiences and by their races.

In an attempt to find a housemaid that not only fulfills her requirements but also rekindles something of the past, the narrator tries to hire Lou Annie, Queen Esther's granddaughter. As the two travel to see Lou Annie, Brown shows both the narrator's naiveté and Queen Esther's reluctance to take part in the outing. When the narrator states,"She [Queen Esther] did not want to go. I'd known all along but found it hard to believe" (Brown, Tongues 146), the readers see something that the narrator continues to ignore. The narrator shows her inability to move out of the past when she cannot fathom why Lou Annie would be reluctant to relocate and become a house servant. Numerous times the narrator demonstrates her inability to move beyond her own needs. For example, when the narrator tells Queen, "Lou Annie can live up with me, in the old cookhouse [...]. Or down there with you, if you want her. You ought not to be down there yourself," Queen responds by stating, "I been down there twelve years by myself" (Brown, Tongues 147). After Queen's comment, the narrator describes Queen as having her "eyes fixed straight ahead, her jaw set," firmly establishing Queen's unwillingness to relinquish her own privacy. When one considers that first, Lou Annie has a family of her own, and, second, Queen is happy with her current situation, the narrator's requests seem both outlandish and inconsiderate. If the narrator indeed believes that the "rules have changed" (Brown, Tongues 146), then she would be able to recognize the importance of Queen and Lou Annie's sovereignty. Noticing Queen's discomfort, the narrator quickly brushes off the incident by stating, "Whatever was wrong, I didn't take it seriously" (Brown, Tongues 148). While the narrator believes her intentions are good, the readers, through the first-person perspective, are able to see the disparity in her comments and

these intentions. While the narrator claims to have changed, the readers slowly discover that her incapacity to empathize with Queen and Lou Annie forever separates her from them and also demonstrates her attachment to the past.

Through her actions and assumptions regarding Queen Esther and Lou Annie, the narrator demonstrates that, although times have changed, she has not changed as she continues to assume moral superiority and control over her black acquaintances. Queen Esther's quiet demeanor shows her restrained disagreement and inability to openly confront her former employer. While the narrator believes that she acts with good intentions, her quick dismissal of Queen's obvious discomfort demonstrates the narrator's selfishness. As the relationship between the narrator and Queen Esther is slowly revealed, the readers learn that Queen Esther and the narrator are more different than the narrator initially believes. Memories are remembered differently by each character, and for the narrator, discussions about the past seem to open up much deeper issues of race and oppression:

> And suddenly the whole Pandora's box of race, with all the unconscious, unintended, even unrecognized withholdings of respect, status, privilege, even rights we never thought about, much less understood at the time, embedded as they were in custom and usage, would open up to silence us completely. (Brown, Tongues 152).

Just as discussions about the past end in uncomfortable silences, "Beyond New Forks" is set around the silence of Queen Esther. While the narrator occasionally mentions Queen's silence, the quiet deference of Queen is frequently ignored by the narrator, thus

demonstrating one woman's quiet submission and another woman's refusal to recognize the truth.

As they get closer to Lou Annie's house, the narrator of the story reveals her hidden desire to regain something of the past. Looking for more than just a helper, the narrator admits, "But there was more to it than that, something nonrational and emotional. I was looking for more than a maid to wax the floors (though the floors indeed needed waxing). In my heart I was looking for another Mannie or a young Queen Esther. Lou Annie was my last hope, I knew" (Brown, Tongues 153-154). In these lines, the narrator reveals her desperate desire to cling to the past. Ignorant of Lou Annie's or even Queen's feelings, the narrator becomes consumed by her own worries and fears. Growing old, all alone in her house, the narrator knows that Lou Annie is her last chance to secure something of the familiar, comfortable past. However, while the narrator seeks to recapture the past, Lou Annie, when finally asked about the job, reacts with aversion and aloofness.

When the narrator approaches Lou Annie about the job, Lou Annie makes no hesitation when she refuses the narrator's offer: "There was no considering, wavering or doubt. Her refusal was as final as the passing of the truck, and our business was over" (Brown, Tongues 157). While the narrator's business with Lou Annie is finished, this line also symbolizes the more significant conclusion to a way of life. Lou Annie's refusal marks the conclusion of her family's servitude to the narrator. In a more contemporary society, Lou Annie and her family are no longer forced to rely on the narrator's family for employment. Although the narrator believes her intentions to be good, when she

leaves Lou Annie's house, the narrator finally sees the effect her request has on Lou Annie. As she makes one last effort, she tells Lou Annie, "Think of me if you ever do need work, or anything. I feel like you're one of the family" (Brown, Tongues 158). Immediately, the contradiction of terms becomes obvious. While the narrator claims to feel like Lou Annie is "one of the family," she conversely asks Lou Annie to be her servant, a job that, by definition, places Lou Annie beneath the narrator. This idea of servitude is an institution of the past, and although the narrator is indeed close to Queen Esther and her family, there will always be a presumed separation, one that places the white landowner over the black servant. Offended and unwilling to work for the narrator, Lou Annie responds to the narrator's request with sarcasm, " 'Yeah?' she said, and her amber eyes despised me [the narrator]" (Brown, Tongues 158). Lou Annie would rather continue her life as a waitress and, as Queen Esther reveals, "a whore" (Brown, Tongues 160). As the narrator drives home with Queen Esther, she realizes her mistake:

> I drove slowly, my hands dry now. The road home seemed lonely, leading back to the past instead of on to the future, like a half-forgotten scene in some old grammar-school reader. On either side flat fields, newly harvested, lay serene in the quiet light. Low in the west, the sun was going down in flamboyant red and gold. (Brown, Tongues 159).

In this passage, Brown shows how the narrator comes to the realization that she and her life on the farm are remnants of the past. The previous way of life will only be seen, as the narrator describes, in the textbooks of school children. While this past way of life is very real to her, as the narrator drives home, the "newly harvested fields" on either side

of the road symbolize the new way of life that is slowly growing and overtaking the old. The sun, slowly fading in the west, represents the conclusion of an era and the passing of a generation.

Unlike the narrator's family, Queen Esther's family is forever scarred by years of racial oppression and discrimination. Although the narrator appears to be progressive in her views, she will never have a comfortable friendship with Queen Esther that moves beyond racial boundaries and allows for mutual understanding. Lou Annie, earning her income as a prostitute, is the byproduct of years of racial discrimination. When the narrator and Queen arrive home and begin discussing their children and grandchildren, the narrator suddenly realizes the vast separation between herself and Queen. The narrator discovers that she can never fully understand the sorrow of Queen or of her race: "My daughter would never be a whore. Thinking it, knowing it, only made me feel guilty, and worse" (Brown, Tongues 160). At this moment in the story, the narrator is no longer blind to the reality of racial separation and social struggle. While the two women, the narrator and Queen, share a connection, their relationship will always be marked by the boundaries of race. As she leaves, the narrator gives Queen Esther a hug and notes, "she accepted but did not return my displays of affection. She did not open her arms, for instance, and hug me back but only patted lightly with one hand" (Brown, Tongues 162). As the title suggests, the two old women have moved beyond new forks, and while they share similar experiences, they maintain their differences. Both women have seen and endured the changes of time; however, while certain things have been altered, there are still obstacles to overcome and differences that will never be reconciled. As the narrator

steps outside of Queen's house, she stands alone in the dark with "no light anywhere in the world except in the headlights of [her] car" (Brown, Tongues 162). In this concluding image, Brown seems to be conveying a sense of fear and loneliness. As she moves toward her home, the narrator finally comes to terms with her loneliness and the circumstances of her present situation. The past has finally been closed, and the narrator of the story must move forward—on her own.

When comparing "Swing Low: A Memoir," "The Cure," and "Beyond New Forks," one notices that the stories unearth three unique relationships that involve people of different race. In "Swing Low: A Memoir," Brown documents the progression of friendship over the lifetime of two closely linked people. Similarly, Brown's story "Beyond New Forks" discusses two women who, although they share a connected past, do not share a future. In contrast to the other two stories, Brown's "The Cure" also looks at the bonds of friendship but instead documents a more brief moment in time and the surprising relationship that forms between a racist doctor and his black patient. Each distinctive, all the stories within this subsection show the companionship that occurs between people from opposite lifestyles. In "Swing Low: A Memoir," "The Cure," and "Beyond New Forks," Brown offers her readers an alternative, more intimate view of the bonds established between blacks and whites before and after the Civil Rights Era. Aside from titles and roles, the characters within Brown's stories are driven by their basic human need for companionship. While the friendships in "Swing Low: A Memoir," and "The Cure" arise unexpectedly, the discomfort and separation between Queen and the narrator in "Beyond New Forks" suddenly provide the narrator with a new perspective of

their relationship. What makes these stories exceptional is their unflinching commentary on both the pain and the joys shared by Brown's characters. In each of the stories, Brown's characters suddenly flip-flop as even the most shameful characters suddenly gain the readers' sympathies, and human nature is ultimately placed under the microscope as Brown shows selfish characters suddenly moving outside of their own needs and desires.

CHAPTER IV

Although three of Brown's stories discuss the close bonds that form between opposed racial groups during pre and post Civil Rights, Brown, in addition, has three more stories that explore the more volatile, tense antagonism between whites and blacks both during and after the 1950s. Again, just as her stories about friendship tend to focus on the atypical aspects of interracial companionship, the three stories "Fruit of the Season," "Let him Live," and "A Meeting in the Road" provide strong commentary as they each provide glimpses into three isolated yet emotionally charged scenes in which race becomes the main point of contention between whites and blacks.[6] All three stories focus on the racial problems of the past and on the more contemporary racial problems that developed during and after integration. In an interview with the Alabama Arts Council, Brown states, "I'm trying to deal with racial issues. I'm trying to get it down. Nobody wants to hear it; nobody wants to read it. Because it's not solved. It's not—Civil Rights didn't solve it. And did it make it better or worse. Better in some respects and worse in others. So I really don't know how things will turn out" ("Mary Ward Brown"). Indeed, this quotation captures the main motivation of "Fruit of the Season," "Let him Live," and "A Meeting in the Road." In each story, Brown captures the hidden aggression that slowly builds under the surface of her characters' skins. Brown's

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[6] While "Fruit of the Season" only appears in Brown's collection Tongues of Flame, the stories "Let Him Live and "A Meeting in the Road" were reprinted outside of Brown's two collections. "Let Him Live" was published in the journal Shenandoah in 1986 and in the anthology Stories: Contemporary Southern Short Fiction in 1989. The short story "A Meeting in the Road" was published in 1998 in The Threepenny Review.

message appears to be one of warning as she sends out the signal that racial animosity did not suddenly dissolve with the onset of the Civil Rights movement. Instead, the characters and the scenarios documented in Brown's stories suggest that the pain and the anger are only displaced. Brown is able to show the extent of continued racial aggression through an array of characters. Young and old, female and male, black and white—diversity among Brown's characters demonstrates the vastness of the racial problem and the extent to which all members of society feel the consequences.

The story "Fruit of the Season" captures the bitterness that becomes embedded in the impressionable children who experience and witness the effects of racism in the deep South. As the story begins, three children, Cato, Daisy, and Jones Lee, gather berries for their mother, Bessie, and their mother's white employer, Frances Marshall. While the story captures the mishaps of the three children on their day's adventure, Brown makes a more profound statement regarding the consequences of racial prejudice as she intertwines the innocence of the children with the bitterness of racial discrimination. Brown uses imagery to demonstrate the meager living conditions of Bessie and her children. First, the narrator describes the "chipped dishes from which they [the children] ate," while also noting that Bessie works for "Frances Marshall, the white landowner's wife" (Brown, Tongues 114). These details all add to the conflict of the story and demonstrate that Bessie, a single, black female, is living in inadequate conditions and working for a white employer. When Bessie orders her children to pick jewberries for Miss Frances, the readers are able to see that the relationship between Miss Frances and Bessie is governed by Miss Frances's superiority. Bessie's request for Miss Frances's

jewberries implies that Bessie is adhering to a social hierarchy; thus, what the white woman wants, the white woman gets.

As the story builds to the main conflict, Brown uses character detail to show the economic separation between Miss Frances and Bessie's family. As the children set out to pick the jewberries, Brown describes Jones's appearance: "He wore nothing at all except knee pants held up by a strip of cloth tied diagonally, front and back, across one bare shoulder" (Brown, Tongues 114). The description of Jones is followed by a description of his sister Daisy, who, although wearing more clothes than Jones, is still wearing "a ragged straw hat, long sleeves, and brown oxfords sizes too big" (Brown, Tongues 115). These details establish the economic disparity and the poor quality of life that many black families endured. Also, because the main characters are children, Brown garners the sympathy of her readers as she contrasts the children's rough appearance with the frivolity of their actions as they search for berries. In the beginning, the children's only concerns lie with their task at hand as they move through a cattle pasture. Initially ignorant of their status, the children are playing like average children, unencumbered by the racial tensions of the time period. The narrator, for a short time, describes the three children in typical, childlike situations as Jones, the youngest child, becomes frightened after his siblings explain to him the threat of snakes in the brush. However, just as Brown reiterates the innocence of these children, she eventually returns to the theme of racial oppression. While these children first appear naïve to the social turmoil of the time period, Brown, through the children, shows how even the most innocent humans are affected by racial discrimination.

As Cato, Daisy, and Jones search for berries, their excitement peaks when they discover a large section of bushes covered with berries, yet the children's excitement suddenly subsides as they conclude their day and are confronted with the reality of their task. Like any children who suddenly discover the item they have been searching for, Cato, Daisy, and Jones are energized and thrilled when they discover the jewberries; "Jones stuck out his stomach, beat it like a drum, and shrieked with delight" (Brown, Tongues 116). However, after the children gather the berries and begin to make the trek home, the fun abruptly subsides as the children become tired, weighed down by the pails filled with berries: "Hot and tired, they walked in silence. Cato and Daisy leaned sideways from the weight of their buckets while Jones, beginning to whimper and complain, fell behind more and more. When it seemed he might give out altogether, Daisy went back and took him by the hand" (Brown, Tongues 117). As the children wearily move towards Miss Frances's house, Daisy encourages her younger brother to keep walking, hoping only for Miss Frances's kindness: "Miss Frances might give us something cool to drink" (Brown, Tongues 117). For contrast, Brown provides her readers with another description of Cato's appearance, except now he is exhausted and weary from his day in the field, "At a row of trees, with the house in sight, Cato put down his bucket. Around the straps of his overalls, his naked shoulders were beaded with sweat. He lowered himself to the ground beneath a large hackberry tree and, with a sigh of relief, stretched out full length" (Brown, Tongues 117). Here, this image of Cato, a young boy, is void of any childhood innocence because in this scene, the readers see not a young boy tired from play but a young boy exhausted from work as he carries the bucket

from one end of the pasture to another. Although a child, Cato knows the exhaustion and the sweat of physical labor as he, working for the white boss, struggles to bring the berries up to the main house. Thus, when he falls down under the tree with the main house looming in front of him, Cato, though a child, is conscious of his position as a black child and knows that his sweat and labor is for the comfort of others. Aware of his own substandard social position, Cato looks at the house and then compares his own house to the large white house that stands before him:

> In front of him was the house surrounded by trees. Big, white, and shady, the house had a downstairs and upstairs, two chimneys and two porches. Inside, there were so many rooms they had to have names: living room, dining room, breakfast room, den. Their mother cleaned the rooms, cooked the noon meal, and washed the dishes. [...] As he looked at the cool inviting scene, Cato thought of his own hot little house and of the blackness he would never outgrow. (Brown, Tongues 117-118)

As Cato internalizes all that he sees, he is suddenly reminded of the "things the grown people said when they met in the church at night" (Brown, Tongues 118). Filled with resentment, Cato spits into Miss Frances's bucket of berries. The other children react in a similar fashion, laughing but never questioning why as they recklessly spit all over the berries.

Abruptly, the story becomes a very serious commentary on the anxiety and resentment felt throughout both the black and white communities as blacks and whites are forced to redefine their roles within southern society. As the story moves from the

children's perspective to Miss Frances's perspective, Brown shows both the disparity and the friction between the two races as her readers view the situation from the viewpoint of a white adult. When Brown begins writing from Miss Frances's perspective, the readers learn that Bessie, the children's mother, is pregnant. Because this last section of the story is told from Miss Frances's viewpoint, the readers are able to get inside her thoughts and learn that her reaction to Bessie's pregnancy is one of disappointment and repugnance. Instead of sympathizing with Bessie, her employer views the pregnancy as a burden and selfishly focuses on how the pregnancy will affect Bessie's housework. When the white female begins her narration, the readers discover that Bessie terminated her last pregnancy and almost lost her life. This detail only further expresses Bessie's concern for her job and demonstrates her economic dependence on her white employer. Yet, Miss Frances's selfishness and severity are displayed in her lack of compassion for and condemnation of Bessie. In addition, when the children bring Miss Frances the berries, her unforgiving character is demonstrated to an even greater extent when she decides to pay the children only with money and not with kindness:

> If she bought the berries (which came from her pasture to begin with, after they'd picked all they wanted for themselves), she would pay the standard country price per gallon. If she accepted them as a gift, they would cost her more, for as the nice white lady for whom their mother worked, she would return their cup of goodwill in full measure and running over. (Brown, Tongues 119)

Although the overall intent of the Civil Rights movement was to remove the separation between the races, Brown's story "Fruit of the Season" shows how the onset

of Civil Rights initially made both whites and blacks more conscious of their roles. When Miss Frances refuses to pay the children any additional kindness, she does so because she wants to maintain a sense of control. Ultimately, the story captures both sides of the movement. The children, aware of the situation and bitter about racial injustice, lash out in a way that allows them to express their anger—the anger they feed off of and receive from their surrounding community. In essence, Miss Frances reacts similarly to the children. Aware of the racial climate, Miss Frances deliberately stands firm on her price for the berries in an effort to maintain a sense of power over the situation. Her reaction to the children is, on a small scale, her reaction to Civil Rights. Bitter and unhappy with the ensuing societal changes, Miss Frances lashes out the only way that she can, and as a result, past kindnesses are never repeated as even children and nice white ladies become adversaries.

In her story "Let Him Live," Mary Ward Brown writes about the social revolution that occurs in a small southern town as white citizens struggle to maintain control over the town's judicial system. Beginning with the line "All he had to do was wake up," the story documents the panic a few townspeople endure as they desperately pray for the recovery of the town's last white judge. Unlike "Fruit of the Season," "Let Him Live" takes place in the 1980s but documents the social strife and anxiety that continue to occur even after integration.

The protagonist in the story, Sally Wingate, is a widowed fifty-three-year-old woman who is unable to tolerate her town's growing population of black residents. Sally, along with a handful of other church members, starts a vigil to pray for the health and

recovery of Judge Carter, a dying white judge. In her first line of dialogue in the story, Sally tells a fellow churchgoer, "Carter's got to live, Rich [...] If he dies, they'll take over the town and county both" (Brown, Tongues 123). In these initial words, Sally clearly makes a distinction between the black and white citizens when she uses the pronoun "they." Thus, it becomes evident that Sally's main concern is not for Carter's health but for herself and the preservation of her own home and way of life. The familiarity of the past is being threatened; therefore, Sally and her friends make a concerted effort to stop the social and political progression of the black community.

As Brown develops the setting of the story, the reader learns that "blacks had outnumbered whites in Wakefield for years, but by 1985 more blacks than whites voted" (Brown, Tongues 124). For Sally and the other white members of the Wakefield community, Judge Carter is the last hope they have to maintain control over a segment of the town's judicial system. Through the limited third-person narrator, the reader is privy to Sally's perspective and, therefore, sees her fear as she equates black social growth with the death of the town, especially when she states, "there were other Wingates who could afford the house and might want it. But not if the whole town died" (Brown, Tongues 124). It becomes evident that Sally and her friends are not motivated by their concern for the Judge or his health, but rather they are motivated by what his death represents and what his absence will entail politically. Thus, the passing of Judge Carter signifies a change in the community, the dying out of one era and the emergence of another.

As Sally gathers support for her prayer vigil, she calls upon several individuals from her congregation to pray in two-hour shifts until Carter regains consciousness.

Through her discussions with other church members, it becomes evident that each person's main motivation is characterized by a fear of continued black population growth. In one telephone conversation, Sally's friend and fellow church member Louise states, "We should have picked our own cotton" (Brown, Tongues 125). Here, in this remark, Louise laughingly minimizes the pain and the struggle of an entire race into one insulting punch-line. As Sally continues to search for participants, she decides to ask Arthur, a mentally handicapped boy who, when asked, states, "I'll come any time. Judge Reese is one of my best friends. I was praying for him anyway" (Brown, Tongues 126). Compared to other church members, Arthur is the only person in the story who claims to be the Judge's friend and who shows true concern for the Judge's health, instead of commenting on the political necessity of Judge Reese's recovery.

As the vigil begins, Sally is praying in the church, focusing her thoughts on Judge Carter: "Sally thought of the Old Testament city where, if they could find one good man, the city would be spared. That's us, she thought, and Carter. She was asking for his life on behalf of the town" (Brown, Tongues 128). Sally rationalizes her plea to God in an attempt to convince herself that Carter's salvation is beneficial to both the black and white townspeople. Thus, as she prays in the church, Sally envisions scenes from her past in which black servants stand out as a vivid part of her childhood. "Now," Sally noted, "daughters and granddaughters of the cooks, maids, and nurses stood on Saturday streets with signs around their necks," and black children's eyes "despised you, not because you were you but because you were white" (Brown, Tongues 128). Ironically, Sally describes a scene that appears to be the opposite of the racism that blacks frequently experienced

throughout both the pre- and post-Civil Rights South. Now, Sally reveals that white citizens are experiencing racial prejudice. In an effort to justify her behavior and overarching concern, Sally visualizes an ongoing prayer vigil at the black church, and to subdue her own guilt, Sally convinces herself that the Judge's recovery is just as important to the black community as it is to the white community. However, her divisive comments expose the selfishness of her actions, especially when she comments, "Carter's the only thing left between us and them" (Brown, Tongues 124). As Sally daydreams of a prayer vigil in a black church, she fondly recounts the memories of her childhood and of the black songs she heard as a young girl: "It was music that, if you heard it as a child, you never got over, because it went with the nurses who wouldn't tell, with bare black feet, steaming corn bread and vegetables cooked with salt pork, with a way of life now gone forever. It went with people you had loved" (Brown, Tongues 130). Indeed, here in the inner workings of her mind, Sally reveals a love for the black community that she now so staunchly fears and opposes. When Sally reveals her affection towards aspects of the black community, she simultaneously proves that her main objective is to resist the onset of change. Although Sally claims to love the black community, she only loves them when she, as a member of the white community, retains some level of social control.

After Sally falls asleep during her shift of the prayer vigil, Arthur wakes her up. Sally tries to make up for the lost time, and, in one last attempt, she tries to convince herself that "There was nothing that couldn't be made up, put back together, replaced, forgiven, or sometimes erased altogether" (Brown, Tongues 131). Although she seems to

believe this premise, this statement is somewhat contradictory because it simultaneously defends and debunks Sally's rationale and primary motivation throughout the story. While Sally believes that all problems can be fixed, she also states that all things can be "replaced, forgiven, or sometimes erased" (Brown, Tongues 131). Thus, when she admits that all things can be replaced, she minimizes her own struggle to keep the Judge alive, while also admitting that something like leadership can easily be replaced. Also, ironically Sally mentions forgiveness even though both sides of the social argument, white and black, are unable to move forward and forgive each other. While the white people struggle to maintain power, the black citizens are picketing throughout town, and thus people on both sides of the debate refuse to compromise. In addition, when Sally states that all things can be "erased," she deflates her own cause by indirectly admitting that that the white population from Wakefield is inconsequential and easily removed. As Sally states this credo to herself, she begins to fanatically pray; however, her efforts are in vain when she shortly discovers that the Judge has passed way. When another church member, Rich, notifies Sally and Arthur that the Judge is dead, Arthur is the only person who appears truly to grieve for the Judge. Thus, Sally's selfish motives become glaringly obvious when her reaction is contrasted to Arthur's reaction: "In the silence that followed Sally got up and tiptoed past Arthur—still on his knees with his head down—to where Rich stood waiting" (Brown, Tongues 131-132). Hearing of the Judge's death, Sally, unlike Arthur, stops her prayers because she discovers that her efforts are no longer necessary. When Rich tells Sally, "He was doomed from the start. [...] Nothing we did could have saved him" (Brown, Tongues 132), Brown also suggests the futility of the

vigil itself. Regardless of the Judge's existence, neither Sally nor her friends can stop the inevitable social change that will occur. Thus, the closing scene of the story is symbolic of the approaching change for the town of Wakefield. As Rich slowly snuffs out the candles, the image symbolizes the dying out of an era and the extinction of a way of life.

Similar to "Fruit of the Season," in "Let Him Live," the white and black characters are adjusting to a changing way of life in the South. In both stories, the racism is neither outwardly aggressive nor brought into the open. Instead, the usage of the third-person narrator allows Brown to show her readers the internal motivations and expectations of her main characters. While the white characters in "Let Him Live" openly discuss their racial fears and prejudices, there is no open racial dialogue across the cultural boundaries. Instead, the majority of the conflict is internal as Brown's protagonist reveals her true feelings through an inner commentary that captures her struggle with both the outside world and her own personal values. Sally Wingate and her friends all discuss their beliefs, but only when getting a closer glimpse into Sally's mind does the reader gain uncensored access, seeing both her inner turmoil and her misguided rationale. This internal conflict is captured when Sally Wingate attempts to convince herself of her appropriateness and searches for personal vindication.

While both "Fruit of the Season" and "Let Him Live" capture the hidden racial tensions that exist between two opposite racial groups, neither of the stories describes an actual confrontation between the two races. In "Fruit of the Season," divisive feelings and emotions are hidden under a façade of pleasantries, while, in "Let Him Live," the main character internally tries to rationalize her racist beliefs while openly

acknowledging her intolerance only to her white peers. Thus, both stories capture the hidden side of racial discrimination, the side that exists in quiet conversation, closed-door meetings, and personal thoughts. Rather than openly pitting whites against blacks, Brown demonstrates how people who once grew up together are suddenly thrust on opposite sides of the racism debate. In contrast to the quiet racism presented in "Fruit of the Season" and "Let Him Live," "A Meeting on the Road" describes a more volatile scenario in which one man explodes and finally displays the same quiet, hidden racism embodied by Sally and Miss Frances. In "A Meeting in the Road," the main character, Ben, believes he is the victim of discrimination when he loses his job as legal council to the county commission because he is white. As a result of his loss, Ben becomes enraged and finally releases his anger and frustration upon a black man driving down the road.

When asked about writing "A Meeting in the Road," Brown reveals, "I wanted to tell the truth about the way things are now. The races are more polarized, more hostile to each other than they have ever been. I had trouble knowing how to begin that one, trying to make it work" (qtd. in Paul 3). In writing this story, it becomes evident from personal interviews that Brown pulls her information from real-life experiences and accounts. Much like the town of Wakefield in "Let Him Live," Ben's hometown is in the midst of social change, and like Sally, Ben harbors his own fears and disparagement for the increasing black population. Because Ben's town is the midst of social upheaval, black townspeople begin to gain more political control; thus, many black citizens are voted into the legislature, removing many of the white citizens from their positions. Set in 1995, "A

Meeting in the Road" captures the hostility felt by one man and the hasty transference of his anger upon an entire race of people.

In the first three lines of the story, Brown begins to establish the setting when the narrator first reveals that Ben is white and that the "newly elected County Commission" currently holds "a black majority for the first time since Reconstruction" (It Wasn't 134). Instantly, it becomes evident that Ben and his hometown of Ashton, Alabama, are in the midst of change. As Ben enters the meeting of the County Commission, the racial separation is noted as all members of the committee are sitting by race—blacks on one side, whites on another. As the meeting begins, Ben discovers that the new commission has several new changes that directly affect him. Once the Committee informs Ben of their decision to require written legal opinions, they abruptly dismiss him, leaving him in shock as he questions their treatment toward him. Shocked by the changes in his job, Ben suddenly finds himself the victim of discrimination when he receives a call telling him that the committee has fired him from his position. Thus, as Brown documents the drastic personal changes Ben experiences, she simultaneously shows her readers how racism grows and manifests itself inside an otherwise rational individual. As Ben's hometown undergoes social transformation, the story documents the pain and anger that grow inside of Ben as he finds himself the victim of racial discrimination.

In the year 1995, the roles have been reversed as Ben experiences the pain and helplessness brought on by racial discrimination. Through Ben's struggle, Brown shows her readers that the feelings associated with human oppression are similar, regardless of race. Slowly, Brown uncovers the reversal of fortune as Ben begins to realize the

implications of his predicament. When the committee commissioner dismisses Ben from the meeting, "Ben's head roared as if landing on a plane. [...] He stood up to protest, but didn't trust himself to speak" (Brown, It Wasn't 35). Ben's silence in these situations marks his restraint, but also emphasizes the tension building inside his psyche. When Ben discovers that his job has been given to a young black lawyer with little experience, "Something in Ben's chest tightened and held" (Brown, It Wasn't 136). This silence accompanied with an obvious inner grievance is first noticed after Ben's dismissal from the committee meeting, but it continues as he struggles to accept the decision. Knowing that the committee's ruling is final, Ben reveals that "there was nothing he could do except take what they'd done, he knew, so he meant to take it with as much grace as possible, and get on with his life. But he couldn't control the feelings inside him, like an angry crowd yelling and protesting, trying to get out" (Brown, It Wasn't 136). The image of the angry crowd is reminiscent of the Civil Rights Era when crowds of protestors marched and demonstrated on behalf of equal rights. Therefore, Brown offers the image as a comparison and, thus, establishes a parallel between the previous struggle of the black community and the current struggle of Ben.

While establishing the similarities between Ben's current struggle and the struggle for Civil Rights, Brown also shows where and how both conflicts overlap. Small details remind Brown's readers of past circumstances and thus balance the readers' sympathies. While the narrator describes Ben's home and the history of his family, the narrator is also careful to note that the house "had been built with slave labor before the Civil War" (Brown, It Wasn't 136). Brown carefully balances Ben's history with present

circumstances, thus showing the readers how quickly times can change and how debilitating discrimination can be. Brown captures the internal conflict of Ben as he tries "to reconcile the present with the past, and to somehow see the future" (It Wasn't 137). Similar to Sally Wingate in "Let Him Live," Ben must decide if he wants to stay or leave. Unlike Sally, Ben does not attempt to fight change, but he tries to rationalize and accept his newly defined position in a predominantly black community. As Ben walks down a country road, he reflects on his history and his present circumstances. As he walks, Ben tries to think through his current situation: "In the clear non-partisan air, he hoped to replace emotion with reason and stop the turmoil inside him. Ashton was a black town now, he told himself bluntly, and whites could expect from them what they'd received in the past" (Brown, It Wasn't 137). Overall, Ben realizes that in Ashton the roles of whites and blacks are now reversed since blacks have gained political and social popularity and whites have become the minority. However, like any victim of discrimination, Ben struggles with his status and his subordinate position, and he realizes that his history is deeply connected to the black community. Raised by a black woman named Easter, Ben acknowledges that Easter provided stability in his life. So strong was Easter's influence that, in one instance, Ben's father told Ben's mother that "Your son talks like a pickaninny!" (Brown, It Wasn't 138). Surrounded by the black culture, Ben grew up blind to the implications of racial discrimination. With a busy mother and a traveling father, Ben's only constant companions in life were Easter and a young black boy named Henry. As Ben walks down the gravel road, he reminisces about his past and reveals that some of his most vivid childhood memories involve Henry. Even though they were

children, Ben's relationship with Henry was governed by racial stratification. When playing childhood games, Ben remembers Henry patronizing him, always allowing Ben to win because, as Henry revealed, "Muh-dear told me to let you win [...] You white" (Brown, It Wasn't 139). But now, the situations have been reversed as Ben discovers that Henry, who now sits on the county commission, is the committee member who started the vote to remove Ben. Again, Brown shows her readers, in a very strong example, how quickly the roles change. Just as the readers see Ben treated unfairly, Brown also uses instances from Ben's past to demonstrate the previous injustices and years of racial oppression felt by black citizens. While Ben is experiencing racism at the age of fifty, Henry Philpot grew up with racial discrimination and, throughout his life, was forced to live within certain prescribed boundaries. Now that the roles have been reversed, years of oppression and inequality have resulted in the backlash of Ashton's black citizens. Ben may be the subject of this story, but the story is not meant to describe the experience of one man but rather describes the experiences of a community, both white and black. J. E. Brown writes about change in Brown's fiction when he states, "Change and continuity, past and present, black race and white, massive abstractions and concrete particulars—all are reflected in a real, whole world, by characters from a complete social spectrum" (x). "A Meeting in the Road" emphasizes the ongoing racial tension that continues to thrive between the races. While Civil Rights helped resolve the legal oppression of black citizens, Brown's story suggests that the tension between the races still exists in the post-Civil Rights era, especially within small-town environments. As Ben continues his walk down the country road, his internal conflict suddenly rises to

the surface when he has a confrontation in the middle of a road with a black man driving a sports car.

The confrontation between Ben and the man in the car is the medium whereby Brown displays the tension and confusion one man experiences as he tries to make sense of his life and his current situation. When Ben begins his walk, the events of the previous week cause him to reflect on his current and former life, but the confrontation on the road releases the latent racism that Ben harbors within his conscience. First, when Ben sees the sports car and distinguishes a black man as the driver, Ben's internal commentary reveals his racial prejudices: "Drug dealer, he'd come to think, right or wrong, at the sight of a black in a flashy sports car" (Brown, It Wasn't 139). This one line reveals that Ben is conditioned to think in certain way, and regardless of the circumstances, he subscribes to racial stereotypes. Although he acknowledges the unfairness of his assumptions, Ben reveals that "right or wrong," he continues to define black people through stereotypes. Thus, when the red sports car races past Ben, Ben feels physically threatened, allows his emotions to swell to the surface, and refuses to censor his feelings.

When a rock flies up from the road and barely misses Ben's eye, Ben releases all of the anger of the previous days when he yells, "Run over me then, God damn it!" (Brown, It Wasn't 140). While Ben's comments are directed specifically at the man in the car, it becomes apparent that the phrase and his anger are really directed towards the entire black community. From Ben's perspective, the black members of the county commission figuratively run over him when they fire him from his position. However, as Ben verbally assaults the man in the car, their confrontation takes on a more significant

meaning: "He [Ben] was like a radiator boiling over. His chest heaved. If he had a stroke, he didn't care. 'You son of a bitch!' he yelled, then drew himself together, filled his lungs, and hurled his voice like a weapon. 'Go to hell. All of you'" (Brown, It Wasn't 140). Here, in this dialogue, it becomes apparent that the actual conflict of the story begins before the incident on the road. When Ben screams "All of you," he directs his anger not just at the man in the car but instead against the entire black community. When the narrator describes Ben's voice as a weapon, Brown reiterates the point that Ben's words are intended to inflict pain. Taking out all of his anger and aggression on one man, Ben allows his emotions to consume him as he abandons all rational thoughts and explanations. Instead of viewing the situation as both an isolated incident and a harmless mistake, Ben turns the incident around, acting as if the driver has personally attacked him. The entire conflict on the road is symbolic of Ben's conflict with the committee. Although he chooses to remain silent after he is fired, this situation on the road is the first opportunity Ben has to expresses his anger. The scene on the road is a metaphor for his struggle with the changing times. The scene between Ben and the driver begins to climax when Ben, driven by his emotions, states, "Only a nigger would do something like that!" (Brown, It Wasn't 140). As the narrator reveals, even though Ben had never used a racial slur before, his usage of the word "nigger" displays the latent hostility he feels toward the black community since losing his job. When the confrontation between Ben and the driver becomes physical, the two men struggling with each other is symbolic of the social struggle Brown is describing. Although not initially perceived as a racist, the white character becomes so consumed by his feelings of anger

and frustration that he directs his hostility towards an entire race of people. Thus, Ben's judgment becomes dulled and biased.

As the confrontation between the two men subsides, Brown introduces a common bond between these two men that ultimately provides Ben's character with some hope for the future. Ben notes that the man standing before him has a familiar quality: "Eye to Eye, Ben froze, as if a restraining hand had clapped him on the shoulder" (Brown, It Wasn't 141). The familiar hand is a vision from the past as he realizes that the driver of the car is the grandson of his childhood nanny, Easter. Ben becomes overwhelmed with emotions as he is reminded of his bond with Easter and, perhaps, feels a sense of guilt when he realizes that he has misdirected his anger and has indirectly attacked the one person who was always there for him in his childhood. Ben gains perspective and suddenly reaches a pinnacle moment of realization, for when he places all of his anger upon the black race, he inadvertently also attacks those people who have meant the most to him. These two men, separated by age and by race, have a common bond, one that is hidden beneath the surface of skin color and position. Instead of telling Easter's grandson how deeply he cared for Easter, Ben resists because "things like that weren't said any more. They were considered racist, patronizing, some kind of put-down" (Brown, It Wasn't 142). Here, at the end of their confrontation, Brown reveals the basis for Ben's emotional unrest: "Also, after Henry, he couldn't help wondering how Easter had really felt about him all those years, at night on her lumpy mattress. If her faithfulness hadn't been three parts necessity at the time. Things had been worse for her then than they were for him now" (Brown, It Wasn't 142). As Ben experiences

discrimination for the first time, he begins to wonder about the black people in his past and the effects of racism on their lives and their treatment of him. While he has always felt a strong connection to Easter, his current situation has caused him to feel skeptical about the relationships he fostered in his past. When Ben discovers that Henry led the vote to remove him from his job, Ben feels betrayed and hurt and, as a result, begins to question the authenticity of his relationship with Easter. Although Ben wonders about Easter's true feelings, he concludes that no matter how bad things are for him, his current situation is in no way comparable to the discrimination or oppression she felt.

When the black driver leaves Ben on the road, it becomes apparent that both men have reached an understanding of each other. As Easter's grandson leaves, he tells Ben, "Man, you take it easy [...] Okay?" (Brown, It Wasn't 142). Ben walks away from the encounter in the road with a new perspective on his situation, and the description of Ben waving goodbye suggests that his perception has changed since this experience: "Ben raised his hand in the semblance of a wave. 'Take care,' he called out too late, whether to the grandson or himself he didn't know" (Brown, It Wasn't 142). When directed towards himself, the phrase "Take care" reminds Ben that he should be careful with his assumptions and should place his own struggles into perspective. Thus, "A Meeting on the Road" ends with Ben learning a lesson about discrimination and anger, and through her story, Brown shows her readers that discrimination and racial tension are still very prevalent in the small southern communities.

When asked about "A Meeting in the Road," Brown states, " 'A Meeting in the Road' may be darker than 'Beyond New Forks.' Ben feels such a sense of injustice. He

is hurt, mad, blindsided by all this. No one is telling this story, can tell it, but someone of my generation. I have to tell it" (qtd. in Paul 4). For Brown, the message in this story is that the conflict between blacks and whites continues to be prevalent in small towns. While people living outside of the South tend to assume that racial strife has subsided, through this story and "Let Him Live," Brown dramatizes the issue of displacement as whites and blacks in small towns try to cope with the changing strata of their societies. While the white people were once the ruling majority, now white citizens find themselves in a rather unfamiliar position. Thus, Brown's stories explore the prevalence of racism among both white and black communities and the frustration that develops as both segments of society are not always able to achieve a peaceful coexistence.

With the three aforementioned stories, Brown offers her readers glimpses into small-town southern life from Civil Rights up to 1995. "Fruit of the Season," "Let Him Live," and "A Meeting in the Road" describe a particular vantage point, and each story captures the tension that existed, and still exists, between members of opposite racial groups. While each story describes a different time or conflict, all the stories document at least one character experiencing a personal revelation. While the children in "Fruit of the Season" decide to take their own action against discrimination, the characters in "Let Him Live" and "A Meeting in the Road" are forced to accept their current predicaments as both characters discover that change is inevitable.

Like the towns described in "Let Him Live" and "A Meeting in the Road," Marion, Alabama, a town near Brown's home, underwent a similar cultural evolution. In an interview for People, Peggy Brawley writes, "On a recent drive down Marion's main

street, Brown points out a number of empty storefronts. 'White businesses are moving out,' she says. 'We're in the midst of a social revolution. Nobody knows where it's going or how to act, or what to do. I don't know what's going to happen. Having perspective doesn't help me see into the future" (88). Brown's interview with Brawley was done in 1987, before the publication of "A Meeting in the Road," her bleakest and yet perhaps most hopeful story discussing racial conflict. While the characters in "Fruit of the Season" and "Let Him Live" are left dangling in the midst of social confusion, in the conclusion of "A Meeting in the Road" Ben appears to gain a better understanding of his feelings and is able to place his current situation into perspective when he is forced to confront the grandson of his former nanny. While "A Meeting in the Road" provides the most unsettling commentary on racism in the South, at the same time, it provides a sense of hope for the future. Although not completely solved, the tension that exists between whites and blacks in many of Brown's short stories is neither sentimentalized nor radical in its subject matter. The characters in her stories are not given great tasks and are not placed in extreme situations; rather, Brown places her characters in the common small-town setting but, in contrast, shows her readers the intensity of her characters' emotions. In Brown's interview with Susie Paul, it becomes apparent that Brown feels strongly about racial problems: "Race is the number-one problem in the South, in this country, although second to terrorism at the moment. I'm worried about it. Look how many stories I have about race in my books" (3). Throughout "Fruit of the Season," "Let Him Live," and "A Meeting in the Road," Brown shows her readers that, although they are

often hidden, racial tension and discrimination were not eliminated through integration and, as her stories show, racism—in all forms—still exists in small-town life.

CHAPTER V

While several of Brown's stories discuss the conflicts and the friendships that evolve between black and white characters, one of Brown's stories, "The Black Dog" moves beyond race as the story makes a general claim about the universal struggles of unwelcome beings. "The Black Dog" does not comment on the state of interracial relations but instead focuses more broadly on the hardships of outsiders who are unwelcome in their chosen environments. Unlike Brown's stories that deal with race, "The Black Dog" does not narrate the struggles of human characters but instead focuses on the troubles of a young stray animal who unexpectedly shows up on a woman's farm. The story documents the dog's struggle for survival and the conflict of a widowed farm woman who reluctantly evolves from being the dog's sworn enemy to a silent admirer. While the black dog's struggle for survival appears to symbolize the popular struggle of the black community both before and after the Civil Rights movement, Brown denies any effort on her part to have the dog represent anything other than a simple country stray. In her comments regarding the story on the online database Contemporary Authors Online, Brown reveals that she never intended the dog to represent the black community: "I didn't have race in mind at all when I wrote 'The Black Dog.' Here in the country, people are always putting out unwanted dogs and cats (I had another black dog show up recently), and it's up to the ones in whose yards they show up to do something about them" (Kasinec par. 4). Instead of focusing on race, Brown reveals, "I guess I did have

in mind something about the limits of human responsibility as I wrote the story. Like, how many needs of any kind can a person take on in addition to his own. But I've been sorry my black dog in the story has had to carry the burden of race—and also that limitation" (Kasinec, par. 4). Instead of wanting to focus on the individual, "The Black Dog" focuses on the inner conflict and the development of the narrator as she slowly becomes captivated by the strength and endurance of a young black dog. Seen as a nuisance and a problem, the black dog manages to persevere, even though the narrator offers no food or shelter. Essentially, the story explores the strength of certain creatures and the obstacles they must overcome in order to survive. Therefore, "The Black Dog" is a story that moves beyond race as it explores the general struggle of all creatures for survival and acceptance in an often unfair world.

Because Brown's story "The Black Dog" is written in the first-person perspective, there is a closer connection between the reader and the narrator as it becomes evident that she is essentially retelling her experiences to a captivated audience. A widow living on a farm alone, the narrator learns to appreciate the tenacity and determination of the black dog, even though she hates these qualities in the beginning.

As the story begins, the narrator describes both the invasion of the black dog and her immediate disdain for this deplorable creature. However, while the narrator describes her own vehement irritation, she notes that no matter how mean she is, the black dog always seems to persist with no outward display of dissuasion: " 'You get away!' I would shout, hoping a shout mean enough would protect me. Sam [her dog] would turn back looking hurt, but the black dog only stopped and wagged his tail" (Brown, Tongues 134).

While the narrator first appears to be concerned about her safety, her attitude quickly changes from fearful to irritated as she discovers that the black dog has no malicious intent and is only seeking sustenance. Angry that this new dog has chosen to settle on her farm, the narrator is astonished at the black dog's ability to simply "move in" on Sam's territory: "At the age of thirteen he [Sam] was thin and stiff, with an occasional limp, but still in control of his territory. The way he let the black dog move in was a mystery" (Brown, Tongues 133-134). Unlike the black dog, Sam is a pedigree who has steadily filled the role as family pet and guard dog. However, unlike the narrator of the story, Sam is unaltered by the presence of the black dog. While the narrator becomes consumed by her hatred and disdain for the black dog, Sam is unaffected by the black dog's company, only fighting with the black dog once when he tries to take away some of Sam's table scraps. Thus, this contrast between the narrator's and her dog's attitudes demonstrates the threshold whereby which the human character is unwilling to show compassion for new, strange creatures. In addition, it is also significant to note that Sam only shows aggression towards the black dog when the black dog attempts to take away Sam's own sustenance. As long as the black dog does not interfere with Sam's survival, Sam ignores the black dog's presence because the black dog offers little threat to Sam's existence. In contrast, the narrator becomes enraged by the dog's presence, yelling and throwing items at him in an effort to scare him off her property and out of her life. Unable and unwilling to maintain a mutt like the black dog, the narrator becomes incensed as the black dog repeatedly ignores her attacks and admonishments. As the black dog moves onto her property, the narrator resents the encroachment of this

unwelcome creature since she, like the black dog, is also trying to subsist in the world alone.

As the narrator becomes better acquainted with the black dog, her feelings begin to get less abrasive, and while she appears to maintain her contempt, she becomes less aggressive as she assumes a more submissive, victim-like role. While she initially assumes the black dog to be old, the narrator eventually discovers that the dog is, instead, an "overgrown puppy" whose "crimes could be blamed on his youth" (Brown, Tongues 137). Brown draws her readers into a comparison between the two characters and slowly builds support for the young dog. Unlike the narrator who has lived a fulfilled life with family and friends, the young black dog is young and struggling for survival. Thus, Brown forces her readers to ask themselves the question "Is this constant struggle for survival all this poor creature has ever known?" As the narrator becomes better acquainted with the dog, so too do Brown's readers, and as a result, the narrator's attitude towards the animal appears more ridiculous and less justified. The narrator's avoidance of the dog seems trite and extreme when she notes, "I dreaded going outside at all because the black dog was there, ready to jump up and paw me, lick me if he could. Weeds grew up in my flower beds. Ivy took over the rock garden" (Brown, Tongues 138). The narrator allows her trepidation to control her actions, and although the narrator knows the dog is harmless, she continues to avoid him.

Similar to the narrator, even her friends react adversely to the presence of the black dog. Even though he is a puppy, her friends refuse to get out of the car when they arrive at her house for dinner. While Sam barks at the couples arriving for dinner, the

black dog is described as sitting next to Sam with his "ears cocked" (Brown, Tongues 138). Yet the narrator notes that her guests are not intimidated by the barking dog but instead are fearful of the silent dog, the dog that they are unfamiliar with, even though a silent dog is generally considered less menacing than a barking one. As the narrator discusses the black dog with her guests, the allusion to race becomes evident when one of the narrator's guests tells the narrator to put up an ad that capitalizes on the fact that the black dog is an "underdog:" "'Oh, an underdog!' Julia's eyes lit up. 'That's good. That's better. You can say, 'Oppressed minority dog needs good home.' That should fix it'" (Brown, Tongues 138). Immediately, with this one phrase, Brown's black dog seems to stand for the struggling black community. Certainly Brown's dog can easily be seen as a symbol for the black population; however, the narrator appears to dismiss that assumption herself when she replies to her friend Julia by stating, "No, the underdog here is *me*" (Brown, Tongues 138). Although the narrator's comment is followed by laughter, her claim makes the struggle of the black dog much more universal as she tries to equate her own hardships as a widowed white female with the hardships of the dog. To categorize this story as a metaphor for race relations limits the meaning and breadth of the material. While this story certainly makes references to racial conflicts, in its entirety, this story is not about race, but rather, this story is about every living creature's constant struggle for survival. The narrator appears to be stating that she is the oppressed minority—she is the one being controlled, and she is the one in need of a good home, free from the nuisance of the black dog. She views herself as the victim because she can only see how the animal affects her life. Therefore, rather than focusing on race,

the story documents both characters' struggles to survive in an unsympathetic world. The narrator indirectly establishes a parallel between herself and the dog, a parallel that is alluded to earlier in the story but becomes more obvious when she claims herself to be the underdog. However, only at the end of the story is the narrator able to sympathize and realize her advantages over the dog.

Slowly, the narrator's feelings for the dog begin to change as she becomes more sympathetic to his plight. When she and her friend Anne are out walking one day, they hear a gun shot and assume that their neighbor Dan has shot the black dog. The narrator is shocked when her friend Anne comments, "I hope Bobby got him" (Brown, Tongues 140). This reaction of the narrator demonstrates a shift in her attitude. Earlier, the narrator and Anne were throwing rocks at the dog and both felt the dog was a nuisance, but now, when the possibility of the dog's death is in front of the narrator, her feelings slightly shift as she begins to show compassion and mercy for this once despised creature. When the narrator learns that her neighbor, Bobby, did not shoot the dog but instead only frightened him with birdshot, the narrator comments to herself, "His grandfather would never have bothered with the bird shot" (Brown, Tongues 140). This seemingly caustic comment is open for interpretation. Either the narrator is pleased that Bobby spared the dog's life, or perhaps she is critical of his hesitation—his compassion. At this point, the narrator's feelings about the dog are in constant flux. While her compassion for the dog seems to be growing, she also dreads his appearance and is relieved when he disappears from her property for a day. Although the black dog has

finally left her alone, her thoughts continue to shift towards the dog as she contemplates what it would be like to live his life:

> I couldn't help thinking how it would feel to be yelled at, shot at, rejected everywhere you went. Everybody else's bowl filled with food, and no food, much less bowl, for you. I hoped he had found a home and a friend, just so long as the home wasn't mine and the friend wasn't me. (Brown, Tongues 141)

Thus, suddenly the narrator's attitude becomes more sympathetic, yet she still continues to refuse her assistance. While she recognizes the grueling life the dog lives, she still remains distant and unwilling to help. When the dog turns up injured on the narrator's front porch, the narrator reveals that her "heart sank to find him [...]. He had never taken me seriously as an enemy" (Brown, Tongues 141). Consequently, just as the dog never takes the narrator seriously, the narrator refuses to take the dog's survival seriously. Rather than looking at the dog as another living creature, the narrator only sees the dog as a nuisance or a pest, an inconvenience to her comfortable life. Instead of helping the dog, the woman leaves him injured on her front porch and retreats back into her house, again playing the helpless victim as she is driven from her own porch. As she contemplates helping the animal, the narrator decides to do nothing about the injured dog because aiding the dog would essentially affect her own comfort and survival. Again, the two creatures are compared as the narrator reveals that she could not help the dog: "I couldn't afford to help him either. I didn't need, didn't want, couldn't look after, another dog. [...] No. I could not have another dog, especially the black dog" (Brown, Tongues 141-142). As the narrator convinces herself that she cannot afford the dog, her final phrase—

"especially the black dog"—appears to suggest that this particular dog is more unworthy of assistance. Unlike her other two dogs, the black dog is a mutt, not a pedigree. Thus, perhaps for the narrator, the black dog is even more expendable because he is not a pedigree and not worth the extra money or the hassle.

Wounded and unable to walk, the black dog suddenly becomes less of a nuisance to the narrator, and as the animal becomes more helpless, the narrator begins to show more compassion towards the ailing dog. Sadly, his pain becomes her comfort as she reveals that "Since he could no longer bother things or come on our walks, he was no longer any trouble" (Brown, Tongues 142). While some would define the narrator's attitude toward the dog as callous, others would claim that she is simply being practical and, like the dog, is fending for her own happiness and survival. However, through his injury, the black dog gains sympathy from the narrator as she comments on the strength and determination of his character:

> I was aware of a growing, grudging admiration for the black dog. Hurt and in a hostile world, indifferent at best, he managed to survive without help from anyone. There was something heroic in the way he lay out there alone with his wounds and never, by so much as a look, asked for a kind word or a crumb. I found myself wondering how he did it. (Brown, Tongues 142)

The narrator's admiration comes from her ability to relate to the black dog's struggle. Although she has friends and family around her, the narrator, like the black dog, lives alone and must survive by her own means. However, unlike the black dog, the narrator has not always lived such a life, and this factor separates the two characters.

While the narrator is older and has experienced life with friends and family, the black dog is young and has constantly struggled to maintain his existence. Although she can sympathize with his struggle, the narrator will never fully comprehend his way of life because she has people she can turn to and, unlike the black dog, she would never have to beg for help or support. As she contemplates his method for survival, she wonders why the black dog has chosen her house: "Did he want to be around other dogs and people? Or did he know by instinct that amnesty is a kind of victory?" (Brown, Tongues 142-143). In her last comment, the narrator reveals her prideful mindset. Instead of recognizing that, like herself, the dog is a living being, the narrator chooses to separate herself from the black dog through a type of hypothetical conflict. After all, there is only "victory" if there is some type of conflict at hand.

This story documents the hypothetical conflict established in the mind of the narrator between herself and the dog. If she aids the dog, the narrator believes that she has lost and the dog has won. Although the narrator has the capacity to save a struggling animal, she chooses not to because she is unwilling to sacrifice her own comfort and does not want to lose the conflict. Therefore, the conflict is determined not by the narrator's own survival but by her own sense of pride. When the narrator finds the black dog dead by her mailbox, she is initially shocked: "I couldn't believe he was dead" (Brown, Tongues 143). As she looks down at his body, she notes that, "deprived of his personality," he looks much smaller in death (Brown, Tongues 143). Standing, looking at the dog, the narrator concludes the story with an open-ended description of the dog's dead body: "The purity of his breast was disarming. Lying there, he might have been

dreaming except for his eye, open and fixed, staring up at heaven or back at me" (Brown, Tongues 143). According to J. C Cooper in her book An Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols, a single eye can be interpreted to represent "the single eye of enlightenment, the eye of God and of eternity, the self-contained" (62). Thus, if the single, open eye of the dog represents the eye of God, then the eye acts as a reminder for the narrator as she suddenly becomes aware of her actions and of God's constant scrutiny. As the narrator comments on the eye looking back at her, it is possible that the narrator feels guilty for not doing more to help the dog. Suddenly, the narrator realizes her own culpability regarding the dog's death, and as the eye looks up toward her, Brown ends the story, leaving her readers wondering how or if the narrator will be changed by the dog's death. The narrator's commentary on the dog's breast draws attention to her previous description of the breast as a white, "large shield-shaped spot" (Brown, Tongues 134). Cooper notes in her book that a shield "is often an aniconic representation of a divinity or hero" (152), while the color white symbolizes "purity; innocence; chastity" and in death "represents birth into the new life beyond" (41). As this white patch of fur becomes more noticeable to the narrator, it becomes apparent that her feelings regarding the dog and her own involvement in his death will begin to weigh upon her conscience. The description of the white patch of fur symbolizes the dog's purity and innocence. If he is indeed the hero of the story, his death marks a turning point for the narrator whereby she will, in the future, be forced to re-evaluate her callous attitude toward different living beings.

Like so many of her other stories, "The Black Dog" ends abruptly, right after the story climaxes and after the main character reaches a turning point or experiences a

moment of sudden realization. The conclusion can be approached from two different vantage points. First, the narrator can be seen as the villain since she ultimately refuses to aid the dog in his survival and deliberately ignores his ailments. However, rather than making the narrator the villain of the story, it is possible that the story instead provides a commentary on the cruelty of the world by attempting to explain the arbitrary method that indiscriminately determines who perishes and who lives. Thus, even if the narrator did provide aid to the dog, there is no guarantee that she could have prolonged his survival. Hit by a car in the middle of the night, the black dog, even though injured, is not directly a victim of the narrator but instead is just another casualty in the ongoing process of life and death. Therefore, as the story concludes, Brown forces her readers to formulate their own opinions regarding the narrator and the plight of the black dog.

CHAPTER VI

Several of Brown's short stories document the class divisions that exist in southern communities and the emotional and physical separation that occurs as members of different social groups become aware of their existence within a social hierarchy. In five stories—"The Barbecue," "The Parlor Tumblers," "Tongues of Flame," "A Good Heart," and "The Gesture"—Brown explores the existence of class divisions and the significance of social order in small towns. Among family and friends, the main characters in the five stories all achieve awareness of their social statuses as the plot of each story unfolds. Often, class distinctions become the main impetus for character conflict. Since the protagonists in "The Barbecue," "The Parlor Tumblers," "Tongues of Flame," "A Good Heart," and "The Gesture" are confronting class issues, much of each story takes place internally as characters struggle to accept their roles and the roles of others in a class-driven society. While some of Brown's protagonists are able to overcome class differences, some protagonists abuse their social statuses by assuming superiority over others. Whether in a position of inferiority or superiority, Brown's protagonists slowly realize the implications of social standing, and as each story progresses, Brown develops her characters so that in the resolution of each story, her protagonists have gained greater perspectives about other characters and often themselves as well.

In the story "The Barbecue,"[7] Brown exposes the social stratum that separates two families in a small, southern town. Because the story is written in the third-person limited perspective, Brown allows her readers to ascertain background information through a third-person narrator who reveals only the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. The protagonist, Tom, is a working class man who runs both a general store and a farm, and while he has been very successful in his endeavors, Tom's status as a working class man remains predetermined since he has neither inherited wealth nor significant social connections. In contrast to Tom is Jeff Arrington, an aristocratic lawyer who has known both money and privilege throughout his life. As the story develops, Brown contrasts the two men, showing how they differ in both social status and personality. In the beginning of the story, Brown separates the two men through character description and dialogue. Like many of her stories, Brown starts "The Barbecue" with a statement that establishes the tone of the story and the relationship between her two main characters, Tom and Jeff. When Tom sees Jeff walk into the store, Tom "braced himself" and questioned, "What does he want now?" (Brown, Tongues 33). The word "braced" and the internal reflection of Tom suggest that there is a preexisting tension between Tom and Jeff. As Jeff enters the store and begins to talk to Tom and Tom's business associate, Brown emphasizes the differences between these two men. Jeff is youthful, with hair that "was cut by a stylist, not a barber" (Brown, Tongues 34). Also, Jeff is a lawyer and not a working man and, thus, when Jeff talks, he knows very little about, and shows little sympathy for, the plight of the common farmer. While farmers like Tom need the rain, Jeff shows his lack of

[7] Including its publication in her collection Tongues of Flame, "The Barbecue" has been published a total of three times, appearing first in 1983 in the journal The Threepenny Review and in 1989 in the anthology New Stories by Southern Women.

concern when he states, "Nice weather [...]. I hope it lasts through the weekend" (Brown, Tongues 34). In contrast to the description of Jeff, Tom is described as a working man who labors both on his farm and in his family's general store. Unlike Jeff who, "still looked young," Tom wears glasses and has a bad eye, and because he is a farmer, Tom wears the same "khaki colored pants and shirts" everyday and "looked funny in a suit" (Brown, Tongues 40). When Jeff walks across the office, the narrator notes his carefree, unaffected personality: "He walked off to the office as if walking were a form of recreation" (Brown, Tongues 35). This description is strongly contrasted with Tom, whose actions are deliberate and not for recreation: "Time was money, Tom had learned long ago, and not to be wasted. From his pocket he took an inexpensive watch like the ones he kept in stock, looked at the time, then glanced up at the clock" (Brown, Tongues 35). Tom, with his inexpensive watch, has very little concern for appearances and is, instead, a very practical man. Jeff, in contrast, saunters into Tom's store, engages in small talk, and then spends his time on the phone. Brown continues the character comparison as the narrator describes the two men sitting on opposite sides of the room. While Jeff sits on the phone on one side of Tom's office, Tom sits on the other side, quickly typing a letter to his daughter. Subsequently, the letter Tom writes to his daughter displays both his economy with words and his inability to waste time: "My dear girl:—Kathy's Daddy using phone so I'll cut this short. Mother and I alright. No rain in three weeks. Nothing in the way of news. Call us Collect when you have time, and don't forget your old Dad. Allowence enclosed" (Brown, Tongues 36). In his letter, Tom uses mostly phrases and writes only about the facts. Whether his letter writing or his pocket

watch, Tom is neither ostentatious nor wasteful. Meanwhile, as Tom writes to his daughter, Jeff casually uses Tom's phone, and while Tom is clearly aware of Jeff's presence, Jeff is oblivious to Tom, only concerned with his business on the phone. These specific details lend to the overall characterization of each man as Brown establishes the separation that exists between these two characters.

Throughout the story, Brown's descriptions of both characters affirm their different backgrounds and their different social statuses. For every detail Brown gives about Jeff, she seems to offer a different, contrasting detail about Tom. While Jeff has inherited most of his wealth, readers discover that most of his property is mortgaged. Contrasted to Jeff, Tom is a careful business man who owns his property and, unlike Jeff, lives by the mantra "time was money" (Brown, Tongues 35). Thus, Jeff and Tom represent different versions of southern culture and society. While Tom has fewer financial debts than Jeff, he is still considered part of the lower class because he has no significant family connection. Tom represents the working class farmer whose profits come from hard work and good management. In contrast, Jeff represents the upper class, the segment of the South that relies on inheritance and family rank rather than hard work. When Jeff uses Tom's store phone to invite friends over to a barbecue, Jeff demonstrates to Tom that he sees himself as superior. Brown carefully creates tension between the two men when, at one point, the narrator states, "On one side of the room was a stand-up desk with a square homemade stool that had come with the building when Tom bought it, thirty years ago. Jeff sat on the stool smiling into the telephone, inviting someone to his barbecue" (Brown, Tongues 36). As the story develops, the reader becomes exposed to

the frustrations of Tom who, working hard to support his family, becomes disgruntled after realizing Jeff's manipulation and exploitation of the Moore family's generosity. While Jeff is oblivious to Tom's growing anger, he also appears to be unaware of his own rudeness. As Jeff sits on the homemade stool that Tom bought, Jeff has no appreciation for Tom, Tom's generosity, or even the stool that he sits on. Thus, just as Jeff takes advantage of Tom's comfortable stool, so too does he take advantage of Tom's generosity and neglects to acknowledge the significance of Tom's helpfulness. Overall, the two men are symbolic of two opposing ways of life, and "The Barbecue" demonstrates how social incongruities manifest themselves within southern society and small-town life.

Jeff, a man of inherited wealth and status who is given everything in life, has accomplished very little and has managed to lose most of his inherited wealth. Tom, in contrast, has worked hard throughout his life and, compared to his father who was "a two-mule farmer in the poorest county of the state" (Brown, Tongues 37), has risen above his past and secured a comfortable existence for his family. While Tom is proud of his home and his store, the narrator describes that, for Jeff's family, the original portrait of President Jeff Davis's mother was their most important possession: "They prized it above everything else in the house" (Brown, Tongues 36). Symbolic of their lineage and their family history, the portrait is the one possession that connects the Arrington's to the past and places them among southern aristocracy. In contrast, the Moores are prouder of their present circumstances and cling not to a dated portrait but instead to their farm and their store, things that symbolize their hard work and continued

progress. However, as each character clings to what he believes is important, Tom eventually discovers that hard work and success are not valued because those things will never affect his place among the community.

After Jeff finishes his telephone calls, he leaves the Moores' store without inviting them to his barbecue. Knowing that Jeff did not invite them to his gathering, Mrs. Moore is hurt by Jeff's disregard. Even though he owes Tom money, Jeff's disrespect demonstrates his selfishness and his indifference. Upset by Jeff's behavior, Tom's wife tells Tom, "we don't count at all to him. We're just nobody" (Brown, Tongues 38), referring to the division that separates the Moores from the Arringtons. When Tom realizes his wife's pain and disappointment, he is angered by Jeff's lack of respect because Tom believes that Jeff's insolence is now affecting Tom's family. Although bothered by Jeff's rudeness, Mrs. Moore quickly notes her admiration for Jeff's wife: "whatever he is, his wife's a real lady" (Brown, Tongues 39). While Jeff is deplorable, his wife, who also comes from wealth and status, is liked and even respected. Thus, Jeff's social status does not make him rude, but instead his status becomes an excuse for his behavior, yet when Tom's wife praises Mrs. Arrington as a "real lady," she faintly discounts her own status as a lady of importance. Tom, in a sincere attempt to convey his admiration for his wife, responds by stating, "She is. That's a fact. Like you" (Brown, Tongues 39). Believing that there is more to a lady than wealth and status, Tom combats the stereotypical definition of the southern lady with his response. However, when Tom's wife replies with the comment, "You have to be born that kind of lady" (Brown, Tongues 39), Tom is again forced to reconcile the fact that, regardless of his

own opinion, class division will always exist and there will always be a distinction between his family and the Arringtons: Tom and his family will never be part of the southern aristocracy.

Infuriated and resentful, Tom decides that he can no longer allow himself or his wife to be treated with such deliberate disrespect and, as a result, Tom refuses to allow Jeff to continue charging goods at his store. When Jeff sends his chef Pig to Tom's store to get all of the items for his barbecue, Tom suddenly realizes that, for once, he has the upper hand and now has the chance to exert his own superiority. Ironically, now the power has been reversed as Tom, the hard-working man who is shunned for his lower class status, is the only one who can make Jeff's barbecue happen: "Tom's heart seemed to rise up in protest. Except for the meat and liquor, Jeff's whole barbecue was in his hand" (Brown, Tongues 41). As a result, Tom seizes the opportunity and refuses to fill Jeff's order until his entire debt is paid in full. Although Tom's wife is hurt after Jeff snubs them, Mrs. Moore appears shocked when she discovers that Tom has refused Jeff's order. Scared that the separation between her family and the Arrington family will now be even more strained, Mrs. Moore tries to tell Tom that she never really cared about the invitation. Angry because he believes that his family is just as significant as the Arringtons, Tom replies to her reproach by stating, "You want me to pay for a party you ain't even invited to? [...] If I ever foot the bill for something like that, it won't be for a bunch of high-flyers better off than I am" (Brown, Tongues 42). Thus, in defiance of the social hierarchy, Tom refuses to back down and submit to the influence of the upper class.

When Jeff's wife comes to pay off the Arringtons' remaining debt, the scene uncovers that although they are considered upper class, the Arringtons suffer from their own problems. As Katherine Arrington apologizes for her husband's behavior and lack of respect, she conveys her embarrassment while also revealing their own tribulations. When Tom explains to Katherine that denying their order "was a case of have-to," she responds by stating, "You were better off, believe me" (Brown, Tongues 44). In this line, Katherine suggests that her own social status is not as pleasant as it seems. Perhaps alluding to her husband's selfishness and inconsiderate nature, her comment seems to hint at her own sadness and, therefore, reiterates the idea that money does not secure one's happiness. When she tells Tom that he is "better off," Katherine suggests that Tom's life of hard work has made him the respectable man he is today. Unlike Tom, Jeff does not understand the value of money because he has never worked for money like Tom has. Therefore, while Katherine's comment is a compliment, it is also somewhat discouraging as it only further emphasizes the separation between the upper and lower classes. While Jeff's wife is able to recognize the significance of the Moore's hard work, her comment suggests that others like her, especially her husband, are unable to empathize and are unable to see beyond their own needs.

Although Katherine pays off the debt in the end, the closing scene of the story reiterates the idea that no matter how much he accomplishes, Tom will never be accepted by people like Jeff Arrington. While sitting on their porch, Tom and Martha watch as cars drive by on their way to the Arringtons' barbecue. Still appearing to be hurt, Martha gets up from the porch, leaving Tom to face the parade of cars driving past their home:

"He sat alone and watched each car go by. Many people saw him and waved, since he was well known in the county. Some were busy talking and did not look to one side or the other, but everyone seemed to be happy and enjoying life" (Brown, Tongues 46). Although he is recognized throughout the community, Tom is still a member of a different social group. While the narrator describes everyone as happy, Tom is alone, watching and not participating, left to wonder what that kind of happiness is like. After the cars all pass, the narrator reveals that "Tom did not look with pride, as on other Sundays, at his store or the land he owned in all directions. Taking a small, black handled knife from his pocket, he opened a blade and began to trim and scrape his nails" (Brown, Tongues 46-47). As Tom realizes his situation, his cleaning of his nails with his knife only further emphasizes his position as a laborer, a working class man. No matter how hard he cleans his work-ridden hands, Tom will never be able to rise to the upper class; he will never be able to get all the dirt from under his nails. Tom exposes his vulnerability as he finally reveals his self-consciousness regarding his physical appearance:

> If someone had only had his eyes fixed, he thought, the rest wouldn't bother him the way it did Martha. He could get along without barbecues and pedigrees, even education, the worst drawback of all. But he did hate his eyes. As always in low moments, he saw them as they must look to the world—ugly and pathetic. (Brown, Tongues 47).

Suddenly, Tom, who has appeared somewhat tough and invulnerable throughout the majority of the story, reveals his pain and embarrassment regarding his appearance. With

the line, "If someone had only had his eyes fixed," Tom reveals the burden of living in poverty. Tom believes that if he had wealth growing up, he would probably have had the opportunity to have his eyes fixed. For Tom, his eyes worsen his situation and make him more of a social outcast. His bad eye is a physical reminder of his past and his unchanging status as a working-class man. Every time he sees his eye, he is reminded of who he is and where he came from, but more devastating to Tom is that when other people see his eye, they are also reminded of the same thing. When the story ends, Tom is lying awake in his bedroom, listening as the cars from Jeff's barbecue pass his house. This closing scene illuminates the consciousness of one man and the deliberate disregard of another. As he lies awake in his room, Tom struggles with the notion that no matter what occurs, he will always be different from Jeff and the society he represents.

While Brown's story "The Barbecue" explores class differences in a small community, her story "The Parlor Tumblers" describes the strained relationship between a man and his grandson and the implications of economic inequality among family members. As the main character, Mr. Peterson, attempts to impress his young grandson, Dan, with his pigeons, he discovers that he must contend with the boy's apparent predilection for the more material things in life. Although the two characters are related, there is a vast separation between their lifestyles and social statuses as Mr. Peterson's attempts to move beyond class and social structure to form a bond with his skeptical young grandson, Dan.

One of Brown's shorter stories, "The Parlor Tumblers" explores the conflict between a young boy and an elderly man who tries to establish a connection with his ten-

year-old grandson after the two have been apart for years: "Mr. Peterson could tell right away that the old closeness between them was no longer there. Dan hadn't once called him Daddy Pete as before, hadn't called him anything except You" (Brown, It Wasn't 115). Noticing that the closeness once shared between grandfather and grandson has been lost, Mr. Peterson realizes that he must regain his grandson's confidence. Knowing that Dan has had a wealthy, upper-class upbringing, the grandfather understands that there is already an obvious division between them. Therefore, when Mr. Peterson shows his grandson the pigeons, he hopes to impress the young boy with his unique hobby while also reestablishing the connection that they once had. From the outset of the story, it becomes apparent that Mr. Peterson is scared that he is not living up to Dan's expectations as he remembers a time in his own life when he had returned home to see his childhood hero and discovered "a pathetic old man, not at all the idol in his memory" (Brown, It Wasn't 115). Mr. Peterson is fearful that in Dan's eyes, he is simply a pathetic, old grandfather who has very little to offer. Aware of his grandson's current lifestyle, Mr. Peterson wants to do his best to gain the young boy's trust and show him that small town life, though different and new to Dan, retains its own type of comfort and happiness.

The narrator reveals significant details regarding Johnny, Mr. Peterson's son and Dan's father. Unlike his father, Johnny has been financially successful in his career and, therefore, lives a life drastically different from the one he knew as a child. Used to living in wealth and posterity, Dan is unimpressed by his grandfather's collection of pigeons. Unlike the other children who live in his grandfather's community, Dan is different and

unfamiliar with small town life. When Mr. Peterson asks Dan to hold a pigeon, the young boy "took the bird but, frowning and squinting, held it out and away from him, so that the frightened bird struggled to get free" (Brown, It Wasn't 117). Throughout the beginning of the story, the figurative wall built around Dan becomes even more apparent as Mr. Peterson struggles to pique Dan's curiosity. There is a sadness conveyed as Mr. Peterson, proud of his pigeons, is unable to impress his young grandson. As the grandfather repeatedly tries to reach his grandson, the social separation between the two characters becomes detectable when Dan finally asks, "What good are all these pigeons? [...] But don't you work, or anything? [...] So my Dad has to send you money every month?" (Brown, It Wasn't 116-117). As young Dan, confident enough to interrogate an adult, questions his grandfather's motivations, Brown is able to capture the huge divide that separates both classes and generations. Not only is the questioning disrespectful, but it also signifies that Dan is aware of the class differences between himself and his grandfather. Mr. Peterson responds to Dan's inquiries honestly and without any resentment or detectable embarrassment. Thus, when Mr. Peterson explains his situation to Dan, he maintains his pride: "He [Johnny] does send a small amount, yes. And we appreciate it very much, but he doesn't have to" (Brown, It Wasn't 117). But, when the young boy reveals that his mother told him about the monthly check his father sends, Mr. Peterson simply responds with a sigh. After this revelation, it becomes apparent that Johnny's wife, "a wealthy girl from Virginia" (Brown, It Wasn't 116) is aware of the class separation between her own family and the Petersons and, consequently, speaks openly about it. Whether or not she is resentful of her husband's

monetary support of the Petersons is never clearly established; however, Dan's reluctance to establish a friendship with his grandfather could be the result of his mother's influence. Thus, Dan's critical reception of Mr. Peterson and his pigeons can be seen as a reflection of his mother's criticism. While most men would feel it unnecessary to explain themselves to a ten-year-old, Dan's grandfather proudly explains his choices when he states:

> Most of my life I did work, hard [...]. I taught school out in the country, because I thought that's where they needed me. But I didn't get rich doing it, you understand. I helped your Dad through Georgia Tech, though, and we gave your Aunt Marge a good education. After that, my heart tried to play out. So all I can do now is piddle, it looks like. (Brown, It Wasn't 118)

This frankness and lack of agitation demonstrate the grandfather's patient desire to form a bond with his grandson. Rather than allow the social divisions to define his relationship with his grandson, Mr. Peterson simply ignores the significance of Dan's lifestyle and upbringing. Instead, he understands that differences exist but refuses to allow their different lifestyles to become a barrier. Mr. Peterson embraces his choices and the choices of his son, never stating that one person is better than the other but simply stating that each man chooses a different path in life.

In one last attempt to capture the interest of his grandson, Mr. Peterson shows Dan his collection of Parlor Tumblers, a special breed of pigeons. As the young boy watches the clumsy birds fall about the ground, the grandfather creates a parallel between himself and the Tumblers when he states, "I feel closer to them, I guess. I never quite got

off the ground myself" (Brown, It Wasn't 118). Thus, the Tumblers are a metaphor for the elderly gentleman's own life. Content with his home in the country, Mr. Peterson never has the urge to fly away from the comfort of the familiar. When Dan asks about the birds' inability to fly, his grandfather responds by stating, "It's just the breed, Danboy. The way they were born" (Brown, It Wasn't 118). With this statement, Mr. Peterson hopes to show his grandson that every person has a way of living, something he or she was born to do. Unlike his son Johnny, Mr. Peterson was not meant to make a fortune or leave small-town life. Instead, Mr. Peterson found pleasure in rural life and in his role as father and husband.

Just as Dan's grandfather currently takes care of his pigeons, in the past he took care of his son and his daughter. Therefore, when Mr. Peterson states, "they're [Parlor Tumbers] the most appealing of all to me, because they're helpless, totally dependent on their keeper. They couldn't fly off in the woods and fend for themselves, for instance, like the others could if they had to" (Brown, It Wasn't 118), he reiterates his preferred role as provider and supporter. The Parlor Tumblers remain his favorite because they are unable to leave him, and they will always require his constant attention and care. However, because his son Johnny has taken over some of the financial responsibility, Mr. Peterson is somewhat stripped of his responsibility, yet he maintains a sense of pride and refuses to be resentful about the class division that separates himself from him son's family. When Dan remarks about his other grandfather's sports car, Mr. Peterson, aching for some type of connection, states, "We'll do whatever you want to do while you're here. Just say the word and we'll do it, if we can!" (Brown, It Wasn't 119). Knowing

that he cannot compete with the wealth and riches of his son and his son's father-in-law, Mr. Peterson yearns to make a connection with his grandson, so he makes one more effort at closeness when he shows Dan his Roller pigeons.

Unable to stimulate his grandson's interest with his other pigeons, Mr. Peterson shows Dan his collection of Rollers and is finally able to make some progress. As the two watch the pigeons perform their routine in the air, the young boy finally releases his apprehension and allows himself to befriend his grandfather. When Dan finally calls Mr. Peterson "Daddy Pete" (Brown, It Wasn't 121), it becomes evident that the original tension has subsided, and Dan is no longer skeptical of his grandfather. Just as Mr. Peterson establishes a connection between himself and the Parlor Tumblers, he also creates a connection between his son and the Rollers: "He [Johnny] was a kind of Roller himself, you know. He wanted to be up there doing his stuff with the best of them. He was never content on the ground, like me" (Brown, It Wasn't 121). Respectful of his son's decision to move away and take chances in life, Mr. Peterson reveals that the daring life was never for him. While Mr. Peterson is happy with his simple life, it is also significant to note that while he stays stationary, his hobby with the pigeons demonstrates his respect for those who leave the comfort of the ground and choose to fly.

When asked if she believes Mr. Peterson is brave, Brown comments that:

> When my husband [who raised all kinds of pigeons] and I would go driving out in the country around where we lived and greet the people we saw, he could tell who had pigeons; he could recognize them. Mr. Peterson is like these folks. He liked children, flowers, birds. He never amounted to much in this world, just had

> a simple, good life. I started this story years ago. But had to figure out how to end it. Yes, Mr. Peterson is brave. (qtd. in Paul 5)

While his son achieves success and wealth, Mr. Peterson gains another type of success, one that is not measured by money or by social status but rather by happiness and contentment. Therefore, when the story concludes, the social division that separates grandson from grandfather is finally stripped away as the grandfather finally achieves his grandson's trust and respect. The story concludes with Dan, awed by the Rollers and respectful of their abilities, and Mr. Peterson finally comfortable and able to explore their re-established relationship.

While most people define social status by money and establishment, a person's conduct can also be a determinant of social class. For some of Brown's protagonists, religious affiliation acts as a stratifying element that separates characters into specific social categories. Even more divisive than religious denomination is a person's adherence to or belief in God. Often, characters in Brown's stories feel compelled to share their religious experiences with others in a selfish effort to push their own beliefs onto other characters who are assumed to be weak or in search of guidance. Such is the case in the story "Tongues of Flame," in which Brown's main character, Dovey Goodwin, tries to change a man by exposing him to her church and her religion. The story describes the efforts of Dovey to re-mould the life of an impious farmer who, although he is a good person, does not conform to her standards of decency. As the members of the Rehoboth Church attempt to revamp and reestablish their church in the community, Dovey Goodwin begins her own side project that involves turning around

and overhauling the life of the stuttering alcoholic, E. L. Nichols. Therefore, the revitalization of the church and renovation of E. L. Nichols take place concurrently and are symbolically linked together throughout the story.

In trying to change E. L., Dovey places herself above him on the social hierarchy. Even though he is a grown man capable of making his own decisions, Dovey assumes that with her help, she can make him a better, more worthy individual. In the first line of the story, the narrator reveals that the Reverend Benefield was called in "like a doctor to a patient" (Brown, Tongues 75) to help reestablish Rehoboth. Similarly, while E. L. never asks for Dovey's help, Dovey takes it upon herself to initiate the formation of his spiritual life. Within the Rehoboth congregation, E. L.'s appearance throughout their revival services causes a small commotion as everyone asks Dovey how she managed to lure him into the church. While the Rehoboth congregation welcomes E. L., they simultaneously single him out as a newcomer, indicating both their astonishment and interest regarding his newfound faith. As everyone becomes concerned with his transformation, it becomes apparent that E. L. is known as somewhat of a town misfit. This is especially evident when the evangelist Benefield sets E. L. apart from the other congregation members: "You're on my heart, brother. I'm praying for you" (Brown, Tongues 79). Suddenly, E. L. is singled out as the one person who is in the most desperate need of religious salvation. Slightly condescending in their manner towards him, the congregation and Dovey feel superior to E. L. and, therefore, because he has never appeared in church, the other church members swoon around him and praise him for his attendance. It becomes evident from the reaction of the church members that they

view E. L.'s appearance in church as a sign of improvement. However, it becomes obvious that, while Dovey hopes to have an influence on E. L, she desperately wants to insure the livelihood of the Rehoboth church. Thus, for Dovey, E. L.'s potential conversion would not only lead to her own personal sense of accomplishment but would also add one more member to Rehoboth's floundering congregation.

While both Dovey and her husband, Floyd, feed and take care of E. L., Dovey's care evolves from being purely physical, into something more spiritual and morally based. What starts out as a few meals turns into project where Dovey begins to visualize E. L. as a new man, devoid of all vice and capable of leading a normal, morally driven life. When Dovey's grown children disapprove of the Goodwins' influence in E. L.'s life, she responds by stating, "But E. L. is just so pathetic" (Brown, Tongues 80). Immediately, it becomes obvious that Dovey views herself as socially superior to E. L. and is comfortable passing judgment on him. In addition, Dovey realizes that her intentions with E. L. are different from her husband's intentions, and because Floyd accepts E. L. as he is, Floyd only wants to help E. L. when E. L. is in need; Dovey, in contrast, wants to change E. L. by making him follow her prescription for a "good life": "Floyd was a good man and would help anybody. What she did was different. She could see E. L. sober and happy like other people. He could have a good life if he only stopped drinking" (Brown, Tongues 80). Thus, Dovey wants E. L to adhere to her own definition of a "good life," and her efforts to help E. L. are based solely on her belief that she will succeed and that he will be a changed man. Because there is something about E. L's personality that appeals to her, Dovey feels that he has the potential for conversion.

The narrator reveals that Dovey appreciates E. L.'s manners, noting that, "there was an air of refinement about him" (Brown, Tongues 81). Believing that E. L. has potential, she feels confident that her efforts to help him will undoubtedly succeed since her influence can only improve on what he already has. When Dovey invites E. L. to church with them, she receives praise from the other parishioners for getting him to attend church services. She willingly receives this praise, yet Dovey becomes protective of E. L. and his new-found faith. After leaving the third night of the revival, she voices her concern when she tells Floyd, "I hope they don't scare E. L off [...] Carrying on so much" (Brown, Tongues 79). Although E. L. is a grown man, Dovey's concern for him demonstrates her own need to feel responsible for his well being. Rather than humbly suggesting that E. L.'s progress is the result of his own motivation, Dovey's internal expression reveals that she feels a personal sense of satisfaction when he shows up to the revival. However, as Dovey becomes consumed by E. L.'s progress, her concern for and interest in E. L. turn into infatuation as she begins having sexual fantasies about him:

> During the night Dovey had a dream. E. L. was in bed with them, and she was in the middle. Floyd slept soundly, but she was awake and aware that E. L. was too. She wished E. L. would move closer, and he did. When he put his arm around her and began to fondle her breast, she was flooded with pleasure. (Brown, Tongues 83-84)

Proud of what she has accomplished with E. L., Dovey becomes consumed by her project and instead of focusing on E. L., her main objective becomes her own personal

satisfaction and gratification. Hidden behind the guise of human compassion and generosity, Dovey struggles to fulfill her own sense of accomplishment and needfulness.

Although E. L. is already a good man with exceptional manners, Dovey's fascination with him is built around her own need for personal triumph. Dovey, with some help from God, expects to perform her own miracle. When the evangelist at Rehoboth preaches about human vice, he speaks about the debilitating vices that people use throughout everyday life to motivate themselves to move forward. While E. L.'s crutches are easily identified as alcohol and tobacco, Dovey's crutch, in essence, is E. L. himself. Later that evening when E. L. accidentally sets fire to the church, Dovey becomes incensed as she realizes that her efforts have failed, and she is unable to change him. Although he shows interest in church and God, E. L. is unable to live up to Dovey's expectations, and in Dovey's mind, his mistake is the result of her own inadequacy.

The closing scene of the story recapitulates Dovey's anger and disappointment as Brown draws a parallel between the fire E. L. starts in the church and the destruction of all Dovey's hopes and expectations: "Her mind still blazed out of control, and there was no one to put it out for her" (Brown, Tongues 92). Just as the parishioners of the Reheboth church seek to revitalize their congregation, Dovey Goodwin hopes to revitalize and change E. L. into a more socially acceptable man. However, both efforts fail as Dovey is left feeling empty and unsuccessful, unable to make E. L. comply with her own ideas of decency and happiness. Thus, Dovey is not just disappointed but also angry—angry at E. L. and also angry at herself for failing at her task. Dovey realizes that

her efforts are not enough, for, in the story's concluding scene, Dovey is left alone in her grief and is forced to accept the limitations of her influence.

Similar to "Tongues of Flame," good intentions go awry in Brown's "A Good Heart," [8] when the main character Sarah becomes aware of her own social prejudices and thus discovers the reality of class separation. Like the character Dovey Goodwin, Sarah Ingram tries to exert her own influence on a woman of lower social status and then, in the story's conclusion, is forced to recognize her selfish misconceptions and motivations.

The story compares the lives of two women who, although separated by class, live in the same apartment complex and establish an unlikely friendship. The two characters, Sarah and Mrs. Wilson, are similar in age yet vastly different in experience and background. While Mrs. Wilson and her husband struggle to support their family on her husband's paycheck from the movie theatre, Sarah lives the comfortable life of a professor's wife. Thus, the two characters serve as the vehicle through which Brown comments on the reality of class distinctions. Rather than simply addressing the existence of a class system, Brown documents the friendship between two young women and shows how divisive class distinctions can be. Through the character Sarah, Brown demonstrates how social prejudices can affect everybody, even those people who consciously try to rise above class divisions.

In the first meeting between Sarah and Mrs. Wilson, Brown establishes a tone and places each character into a specific social group. Through character dialogue and dialects, Brown establishes the class differences that eventually become divisive. As the

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[8] Initially appearing in 1958 with the title "People Like That" in The University of Kansas City Review, the story underwent significant change when it reappeared in Brown's second collection of short stories, It Wasn't All Dancing.

two characters become acquainted with each other, it becomes evident that both Mrs. Wilson and Sarah are characterized and defined by their husbands' employments. Sarah's husband, a college professor, works in a white-collar profession while Mrs. Wilson's husband, a theatre worker, makes his living in a blue-collar, labor-oriented profession. When Mrs. Wilson introduces herself as "Miz Wilson," the limited third-person narrator reveals that she speaks with an "unexpected country dialect" (Brown, It Wasn't 123). Thus, the form with which she introduces herself and the dialect with which she speaks immediately distinguish Mrs. Wilson's personal history from Sarah's. Mrs. Wilson's formality suggests that she is aware of their differences and is, therefore, somewhat detached and feels separated from Sarah. Sarah, in contrast, desires closeness and potential friendship, and while it becomes evident that she is aware of class divisions, Sarah initially refuses to acknowledge openly the differences between herself and Mrs. Wilson.

In addition to differences in background, in this first meeting, the ideological contrasts between Mrs. Wilson and Sarah become apparent when Mrs. Wilson comments on Sarah's lack of children. When Sarah tells Mrs. Wilson that she has been married to her husband Philip for two years, Mrs. Wilson comments, "Time you had one [a baby], idn't it?" (Brown, It Wasn't 124). Although Mrs. Wilson formally introduces herself as "Miz Wilson," her forthrightness when speaking to Sarah about children follows no social decorum and displays her lack of social etiquette. This comment from Mrs. Wilson not only reveals frankness of character but also reveals a difference in lifestyle. While Mrs. Wilson believes that Sarah should start having children, Sarah and her

husband obviously feel differently. They are more interested in securing their position in society than they are in establishing a family. While Mrs. Wilson and her husband struggle to maintain their existence, Sarah and her husband live a secure life while working towards their own social and career goals.

While Philip tries to secure his career, Sarah tries to find her niche among the other faculty wives. For Sarah, Mrs. Wilson's friendship provides social respite from the competition of high society. Although different in background and current lifestyle, Sarah reveals her fondness for Mrs. Wilson when she states:

> The liking grew. After being with other faculty wives, all bright, ambitious, set on helping their husbands to full professorships or tenure, Sarah enjoyed being with someone out of the running. Mrs. Wilson didn't know and didn't care about anything except Robert, Little Robert, and where to save a penny on groceries. (Brown, It Wasn't 124)

Here, Sarah demonstrates the separation between herself and Mrs. Wilson while also revealing her selfish motivations in their friendship. In a sense, Sarah appears jealous of Mrs. Wilson's simple life, yet Sarah's comments also reveal her naiveté as she trivializes Mrs. Wilson's life and makes Mrs. Wilson's lifestyle sound simple and undemanding. However, what Sarah fails to notice is that Mrs. Wilson's life is driven by necessity and survival. Sarah's life, in contrast, is driven by frivolities and false ambition as she and her peers struggle to enrich their own lives through their husbands' careers. As their friendship develops, the class division that exists between Mrs. Wilson and Sarah becomes more perceptible: "Sarah began to drop in for short visits while Robert was at

work. Mrs. Wilson would go on folding diapers or ironing" (Brown, It Wasn't 124). While Sarah has time to leisurely "drop in," Mrs. Wilson is forced to continue working. While their class differences are first seen as a novelty, Sarah eventually discovers that no matter how hard she tries, she is unable to look past their differences.

Although the differences between Sarah and Mrs. Wilson are apparent, Sarah desperately tries to ignore their dissimilarity even though her outward dialogue betrays her inner discourse. When she comments to Philip, "She [Mrs. Wilson] never has any fun," Sarah reveals her naiveté and then appears shocked when Philip refers to the Wilsons as "people like that" (Brown, It Wasn't 124). She responds, "What do you mean, 'people like that'? [...] They're just people like everybody else" (Brown, It Wasn't 125). The question that arises is whether or not Sarah truly believes her own statement or whether she is simply trying to ignore the reality of class differences. Already, she has noticed a difference between her own lifestyle and Mrs. Wilson's, but her comments to Philip show her avoiding the separation she has already acknowledged.

While Sarah tries to convince herself that she does not promote social stratification, her attitude towards Mrs. Wilson contradicts her previous dialogue with her husband. When Sarah decides to invite the other faculty wives over to tea, the narrator reveals that "When she [Sarah] thought of Mrs. Wilson, next door but left out, she decided to ask her to come and help serve" (Brown, It Wasn't 126). Instead of inviting Mrs. Wilson to simply have tea with the other ladies, Sarah expects Mrs. Wilson to help her serve. Thus, when Sarah asks Mrs. Wilson to serve, Sarah displays her own assumed superiority and class prejudice. When Mrs. Wilson abstains from helping Sarah the day

before the tea, Sarah's internal reflection reveals her true feelings: "Anyone else would lend a hand, Sarah thought" (Brown, It Wasn't 126), but Sarah would not expect help from anyone else. When Mrs. Wilson goes to leave Sarah's house, Sarah tells Mrs. Wilson, "Well, come early tomorrow" (Brown, It Wasn't 126). The narrator reveals that Sarah had "already showed her [Mrs. Wilson] what to do, mainly in the kitchen" (Brown, It Wasn't 126). Here, in these lines, Sarah demonstrates her superiority when she commands Mrs. Wilson to arrive early, instead of asking her. When Sarah relegates Mrs. Wilson to kitchen duty, Sarah's hidden prejudices take shape as she mistakenly assumes that Mrs. Wilson is willing and capable of performing domestic, kitchen tasks. Thus, when Mrs. Wilson neglects to attend Sarah's party, it appears that Mrs. Wilson refuses to yield to Sarah's demands. Sarah, feeling jilted, becomes bitter and notes that "they had nothing in common. They were women and human beings who happened to be neighbors, which could have been everything but was not enough, it seemed" (Brown, It Wasn't 127-128). Because Sarah is angry with Mrs. Wilson, Sarah selfishly admits that she is unable to overlook their differences, and her abrupt admonishment of Mrs. Wilson reveals both Sarah's class consciousness and weakness of character. However, as the story proceeds, it becomes evident that the friendship between Sarah and Mrs. Wilson offers more than just social reprieve as their camaraderie serves as the antidote to Sarah's loneliness.

In an effort to disguise and disregard her own loneliness, Sarah repeatedly comments on the grim circumstances surrounding the Wilsons' lifestyle. Regardless of Sarah's remarks, her perceptions regarding Mrs. Wilson's happiness are unsubstantiated

by textual descriptions because whether Mrs. Wilson is making small talk with the postman or ironing clothes, the descriptions of Mrs. Wilson always convey a sense of contentment. While Sarah appears fixated with Mrs. Wilson's lifestyle, the third-person limited narrator reveals Sarah's views regarding her own lonely life, thus demonstrating that her preoccupation with the Wilsons is actually her way of ignoring her own anguish. When Sarah grudgingly avoids Mrs. Wilson after the tea party, she reveals her own feelings of dejection: "After all, she had no friends here either. Not the close, comfortable kind it took a while to make. Those she'd left behind. Now, when she wasn't busy she was lonely—except for Philip, who spent most of his time in a classroom or his office, more accessible to students than to her, she sometimes felt" (Brown, It Wasn't 128). Although different in background and current circumstance, Mrs. Wilson offers Sarah a chance at a close friendship, but their different roles remove any hope of a comfortable friendship because neither person is capable of fully understanding the other. This type of misunderstanding is demonstrated when, angry and hurt after Mrs. Wilson misses her tea party, Sarah discovers the reason for Mrs. Wilson's absence. Again, as in previous situations, Mrs. Wilson is conscious of her lower status and admits to Sarah that she felt uncomfortable attending a party of society women. Unable to find an appropriate dress to wear, Mrs. Wilson refuses to attend Sarah's tea party because she did not want to embarrass herself or Sarah, and when Mrs. Wilson confesses this, Sarah is forced to openly confront the differences between herself and Mrs. Wilson.

Ashamed by her anger and naiveté, Sarah tries to do a good deed when she offers to loan Mrs. Wilson some clothing for a trip home. Since their acquaintance, Sarah has

wanted to do something nice for Mrs. Wilson, and the idea of lending Mrs. Wilson some clothes gives Sarah the opportunity to do something good while also alleviating some of her guilt. When Sarah tells her husband that she is planning to lend Mrs. Wilson some clothes, she asks Philip if he thinks Mrs. Wilson's feelings will be hurt by her offer. Philip responds, "It's your own feelings you'd better think about, in my opinion" (Brown, It Wasn't 130). Indeed, it is significant to note the impetus for Sarah's generosity. Ashamed of her behavior toward Mrs. Wilson in the past, Sarah offers Mrs. Wilson the clothes in an attempt to prove that she is uninfluenced by and unyielding to class differences. By offering Mrs. Wilson some of her favorite clothing items, Sarah tries to perform a good deed for Mrs. Wilson yet also wants to demonstrate her own selflessness and altruism. Philip, although sometimes crude in his comments, represents the voice of reality as he acknowledges the class differences that Sarah so vehemently tries to avoid. When Sarah, proud of her offer to Mrs. Wilson, tells Philip that Mrs. Wilson looked "like a million dollars" wearing the borrowed clothes, Philip bitingly replies, "Until she opened that mouth" (Brown, It Wasn't 131). Although his remarks are callous, Philip's unabashed observations exemplify the class stratification and the way most people in his society view the lower classes. Thus, his attitude and his commentary represent feelings that Sarah represses within herself and tries to avoid.

When Mrs. Wilson arrives home after her trip, Sarah waits to hear about her vacation. However, when it becomes apparent that Mrs. Wilson is avoiding Sarah, Sarah wonders if something happened to her clothes. When, after two days, Sarah confronts Mrs. Wilson about the clothes, Sarah, while standing in Mrs. Wilson's kitchen, realizes

the economic separation between the two women: "While she waited [for the clothes], feeling like a landlord or a bill collector, Sarah looked at the old gas stove, dented coffeepot, and limp plastic curtains" (Brown, It Wasn't 132). Suddenly, Sarah realizes that she and Mrs. Wilson will always be separated by their different lifestyles. Although she tries to ignore class differences, when Sarah finally gets her clothes home and realizes that her favorite dress is stained and ruined, she is forced to confront the reality of class separation. As she looks at the perspiration stains on her dress and notices the missing button on her jacket, Sarah envisions Mrs. Wilson wearing her clothes and then "clearest of all, she could see Mrs. Wilson, back from Mississippi, going to the cheapest cleaner in town" (Brown, It Wasn't 133). Suddenly, Sarah must confront both her naiveté and her wounded feelings.

Brown ends the story with the image of Sarah crying on her bed: "There was only one thing she could do about it at the moment, and she did it. She sat down on her bed and cried" (Brown, It Wasn't 133). As Sarah is forced to face the reality of Mrs. Wilson's lifestyle, Brown alludes to Sarah's own selfish motivations. Unwilling to accept that Mrs. Wilson has a different social background and lives a different lifestyle, Sarah expects Mrs. Wilson to respond in a certain way. However, Sarah must face the truth when she realizes that Mrs. Wilson's life is structured around necessity and not around appearances or social guidelines. Even though Sarah lends Mrs. Wilson her favorite dress, Sarah neglects to realize that Mrs. Wilson lives a life where essentials outweigh luxuries. Dressed in Sarah's clothes, Mrs. Wilson is still the same poverty-stricken mother underneath. Thus, when Sarah cries, she cries not only for the loss of her clothes,

but also because she suddenly realizes that in the process of helping Mrs. Wilson, she has lost a friend and the innocence that allowed her naively to disregard class stratification.

In her story "The Gesture,"[9] Brown again confronts the existence a social hierarchy as she documents the relationship between two women who are separated by class and circumstance. While the characters in "A Good Heart" meet as strangers, the characters in "The Gesture," Corrie and Harriet, are old friends from college who meet, not on a friendly basis, but because Corrie hires Harriet to do some seamstress work. As an example of Brown's earlier work, this story demonstrates her signature style as she places emphasis on small details in an attempt to clearly establish the class separation between the two characters. Like Brown's other stories that focus on social stratification, "The Gesture" juxtaposes the lifestyles of two characters who live under different circumstances and who are ultimately separated by their divergent standards of living. Like Mrs. Wilson and Sarah in "A Good Heart," Corrie and Harriet are separated by economic circumstances. While people like Mrs. Wilson and Harriet live lives that are driven by necessity, people like Corrie and Sarah focus on the material aspects of living and are unaccustomed to a life void of luxury. Thus, similar to "A Good Heart," "The Gesture" explores class structure as the story provides critical commentary on the frivolity of an upper-class woman who has a narrow perspective of life and has little understanding of happiness outside of high society.

From the beginning, Brown establishes the character Corrie as a woman consumed by her status within her community. Defined not by her own accomplishments

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[9] The story "The Gesture" is one of Brown's earlier stories and was only published once in the University of Kansas City Review in the autumn of 1956.

but instead defined by her husband's, Corrie willingly recognizes that she is invited to her alma mater because her husband "Jim was a successful lawyer and they thought that she might be good for a donation" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188). Corrie, proud of her social status and her husband's success, notes that her only asset throughout college was her beauty: "In retrospect her only contribution seemed vaguely decorative—maid in the May Court, class beauty, model for occasional publicity pictures...But she had got Jim in the end, so all was well" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188). Thus, Brown establishes Corrie as a woman who is engrossed with her appearance and the perceptions of others. As Corrie longs to return to her alma mater, Newton, she not only wants to see sights from her past but she longs to show her old teachers "how well she had done" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188). This glimpse into Corrie's mindset provided by a third-person limited narrator allows Brown slowly to develop Corrie's vain personality. Through small details and revealed thoughts, Corrie's selfishness and frivolous lifestyle become evident as she fails to see beyond social status when she encounters Harriet, a friend from college.

As Corrie begins to prepare herself for her visit to Newton, her first line of dialogue in the story reiterates her preoccupation with her outward appearance: "What'll I wear, Mother?" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188). When Corrie discovers that her former Newton classmate, Harriet Martin, is working as a seamstress, Corrie's mother reveals to her daughter that "The poor child's [Harriet's] husband is not....a good provider" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188). Immediately, Brown establishes the separation between Corrie and Harriet. While Corrie has a successful and wealthy husband, Harriet appears to be dealing with opposite circumstances. While Corrie's mother tries to be sympathetic,

the phrase "poor child" is doubly significant as it adds to the character contrast and emphasizes Harriet's economic situation and her assumed emotional distress. Therefore, as Corrie and her mother have a conversation about Harriet, Corrie reveals her own personal predispositions regarding a person's wealth and social status. After seeing Harriet in the town grocery store, Corrie describes that she is "shocked" because she believes that Harriet's eyes "looked a little desperate" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188). When Corrie assumes Harriet's eyes reveal her desperation, she hastily assumes that Harriet's physical condition is an effect of her assumed poverty. As Corrie notes, "Harriet had been Miss Everything at Newton. She was smart, attractive, talented...Who would have dreamed she would end up sewing for people?" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188-189). When the limited narrator reveals Corrie's thoughts, her misguided perspective is further illuminated as she continually disregards the possibility of Harriet's happiness because of Harriet's lower economic and social status. Corrie mistakenly assumes that Harriet has lost her intelligence, her beauty, and her talent simply because she now takes in sewing. Yet, as Corrie makes hasty generalizations regarding Harriet's happiness, Corrie's faulty logic reveals her own social prejudices, selfish motivations, and narrowed perceptions.

When Corrie's mother sets up a dress appointment for Corrie to visit Harriet, Corrie's selfish attitude becomes evident when she openly addresses her skepticism of Harriet's talent: "But this isn't a matter of charity, Mother. How do you know she's any good?" (Brown, "The Gesture" 189). In this line, Corrie places her own materialistic concerns above the financial needs of her former classmate. Rather than willingly

supporting her friend, Corrie appears disgruntled and troubled when her mother makes the appointment. Thus, in this scene between Corrie and her mother, Brown gives the reader an uncensored glimpse into Corrie's callous way of thinking. Corrie's only concern is for herself as she continues to worry about her appearance at the Newton reunion. Even though her mother offers a compassionate voice and explains her rationale for choosing Harriet as a seamstress, Corrie's words and the narrator's description of her reaction suggest that Corrie reluctantly complies with her mother's wishes. Corrie tells her mother, "Before you send me, you'd better prepare me. What exactly is wrong with her husband?" (Brown,"The Gesture" 189). Corrie oversimplifies a much more complex situation when she supposes that Harriet's situation is not a choice but instead the result of her husband's failure.

Forced to step out of her happy, economically sound world, Corrie repeatedly reveals her selfish attitude as she prepares herself for her appointment with Harriet. As she drives to meet Harriet, the limited narrator reveals that Corrie "did not enjoy the drive. She dreaded this afternoon. She didn't enjoy people who were down on their luck. They made one feel guilty somehow—and besides, they were always complaining..." (Brown, "The Gesture"189). Here, Brown directly addresses Corrie's conceit and, therefore, portrays her as a heartless individual who constructs her own social boundaries in order to preserve her happiness and contentment. Thus, Corrie selectively chooses what parts of reality she wants to encounter and only chooses to acknowledge those parts of reality that make her feel better about herself or her life.

As Corrie arrives at Harriet's home, the narrator reveals Corrie's reactions to Harriet and the environment. Brown's deliberate word choice throughout the story adds another dimension to Corrie's experience as Brown describes Harriet and her house: for example, Harriet's house is a "once-fine colonial cottage." (Brown, "The Gesture" 189). Brown's usage of the compound "once-fine" is also duly applicable to Harriet herself. Brown contrasts the image of Harriet's "once-fine colonial cottage" ("The Gesture"189) with the image of Corrie's "sturdy brick house" (Brown, "The Gesture" 191). The house, like Harriet, is ascribed merit through physical appearance and description. As Corrie looks around Harriet's house, she repeatedly displays her preoccupation with material wealth when she notes, "There was nothing to see but the meagerness of poverty, the neatness of industry. There was no sign of prosperity anywhere" (Brown,"The Gesture"189-190). Because the story is told from a limited perspective, Brown's readers are privy to Corrie's thoughts, and the one-sided narrative demonstrates Corrie's opinion regarding Harriet and her domestic situation. Thus, Brown pays specific attention to physical details in an effort to reiterate Corrie's limited perception and her preoccupation with physical appearance and materialistic wealth.

Corrie and Harriet are opposite women who subscribe to two different ways of life. While Harriet functions out of economic necessity, Corrie functions out of social necessity. When Corrie first arrives at Harriet's, the narrator notes that Harriet "chose to be all business" (Brown, "The Gesture"189). Just as Corrie refuses to see this meeting as a social visit, Harriet maintains her own separation from Corrie when she treats Corrie as a client. Instead of probing deeper into Harriet's life, Corrie makes an assumption about

Harriet's lifestyle simply by evaluating her physical possessions, yet Corrie's assumptions are misguided and proven false. In addition, Corrie demonstrates her lack of faith and compassion for her old schoolmate as she remains skeptical of Harriet's skill as a seamstress. Only concerned about her own appearance, Corrie has little regard for Harriet and her family, so when she drives away from Harriet's house, Corrie is relieved that she and Harriet did not "spend the afternoon wallowing in Harriet's misery" (Brown,"The Gesture"190). However, Corrie is shocked that Harriet never even mentions her unhappiness or economic deprivation. Corrie appears to admire Harriet's stoicism when Corrie reveals that "you had to hand it to Harriet..." (Brown, "The Gesture" 190). Although she never asks Harriet about her happiness, Corrie is so consumed by her own wealth and status that she assumes that anyone who lives without economic comfort must be miserable. Corrie, with her narrow-minded view of life, fails to recognize the possibility of Harriet's happiness. Even though Corrie sees that Harriet has "cute children," she is unable to see beyond Harriet's social status. Thus, as Corrie places herself above Harriet on the social hierarchy, Corrie's arrogance and social prejudice come under severe scrutiny as her assumptions about Harriet continually prove false.

As Corrie refuses to recognize Harriet's happiness, she does little to help resolve Harriet's financial deprivation. Instead of willingly giving Harriet additional business, Corrie refuses to tell her other society friends about Harriet's skills. Although Corrie briefly contemplates telling her friends, her selfish nature takes over, and she realizes that "Harriet would get so she wouldn't do a thing for her. It had been Corrie's experience

that if you found a good dressmaker, a good yard man, or a good ironer, it was best to keep your mouth strictly shut" (Brown, "The Gesture" 190). As a result, instead of aiding Harriet with her financial woes, Corrie would rather see Harriet continue to suffer if it meant that Harriet would always be available to Corrie. Thus, when Corrie goes to a party with her husband, she neglects to mention Harriet's skills as a dressmaker to her other friends and then forgets about Harriet after a few drinks. Comfortable in her upper-class existence, Corrie only reflects upon her visit with Harriet when she returns from her party and "was in bed and awake from overeating" (Brown, "The Gesture" 190). This image of Corrie overfed and comfortable in her own bed is a stark contrast to the image Corrie envisions of Harriet's two boys sitting on a school bus with their books resting on "bony knees" (Brown, "The Gesture"190). Here, in this scene, the reader begins to think that perhaps Corrie feels guilty about her heartless behavior towards Harriet. However, as quickly as she envisions Harriet's children and the daily housework Harriet endures, Corrie "then, thinking of her own, easy, ordered days, [...] fell asleep" (Brown, "The Gesture" 191).

When Harriet arrives at Corrie's house with Corrie's garments, Brown also contrasts the two women by examining how each one views her education and her time at Newton. While Corrie admits that she was never much of a student and that her connection to Newton was "like having a good family connection" (Brown, "The Gesture" 188), Harriet, in contrast, shows the reader that she gained more than just a "connection" from Newton when she quotes a poem from Robert Frost that she studied in a contemporary literature course. The disparity and the distance between the two women

grow as their lives are contrasted and as Corrie confronts her own superficial ideas about love and happiness. The more Corrie assumes about Harriet, the more Corrie's selfishness and vanity become apparent. As Brown juxtaposes the two women and their differing social statuses, the story ends with an ironic twist when Corrie is forced suddenly to reevaluate her assumptions regarding Harriet's happiness.

When Harriet finishes the dress and suit, Corrie recognizes the reality of Harriet's situation and the possibility that Harriet is content even with her lower-class existence. As Corrie enters Harriet's house to pick up her garments, she again comments on the paucity of Harriet's home: "There's no sense in being this bad off, she thought, looking distastefully at the bare floor and the studio couch that served as sofa. Harriet should take her children and leave. She could do better than this alone..." (Brown, "The Gesture" 192). Because Corrie is so consumed with material things and is unable to define happiness outside of social and economic wealth, she fails to recognize that Harriet is happy with her life and with her husband. Subsequently, when Harriet's husband interrupts Corrie's fitting, Corrie not only gets her first glimpse at Harriet's husband but also gets her first glimpse at Harriet's contentment. To Corrie's surprise, Harriet and her husband, Bill, share a deep, mutual love for one another. Instead of being ashamed of her husband, Harriet calls him into the room and introduces him to Corrie. The narrator reveals that Bill's appearance is somewhat disheveled, and ironically, when he attempts to apologize for his appearance, Harriet replies, "Corrie doesn't care. She's an old friend from Newton" (Brown, "The Gesture" 193). Here, Harriet's character and personality rise above Corrie's as Harriet identifies Corrie as a "friend." While Harriet is

unconcerned about appearances, Corrie is consumed by them, and would have, of course, noticed Bill's rumpled appearance. But more importantly, Corrie notices the bond between Harriet and her husband. Commenting on Harriet's work, Bill makes the very simple but prideful boast that "Harriet is an artist" (Brown , "The Gesture"193). When Harriet and her husband share this brief moment of affection, Corrie watches with surprise and with a slight tinge of perceptible jealousy: "Harriet held out her free hand in a gesture of affection. He took it and smiled—such a friendly smile for a man to give his wife. Then he bowed quickly out" (Brown, "The Gesture"193). For one slight moment in the story, class differences are insignificant as Corrie sees Harriet's love for her husband.

As Corrie leaves Harriet's home, she is shocked to discover that Harriet is only charging her fifteen dollars for her work. Although Corrie feels that Harriet's price is much too low, she ends up giving Harriet the exact amount. The fee Harriet charges for her work is perhaps another reference to the artistry of her sewing. Instead of viewing her work as a means of income, Harriet perhaps sews out of enjoyment of the craft. Her low wage indicates that, in contrast to Corrie, money is not everything. Love—love of one's work and love of one's family—is perhaps the most important aspect of Harriet's life. As a result, Corrie rides home from her dress fitting confused and shocked at the scene she witnessed between Harriet and her husband: "she kept remembering that gesture of Harriet's, when she held out her hand to her husband. What had it meant? Was it possible that she loved him...a wreck like that, who had ruined her life?" ("The Gesture"193-194). When the narrator reveals Corrie's thoughts regarding the gesture,

Brown uses an ellipsis in the middle Corrie's statement, demonstrating Corrie's growing confusion and uncertainty. True to the function of an ellipsis, Brown uses the mark of punctuation to show a pause in Corrie's thought, symbolizing a figurative pause in Corrie's opinions regarding Harriet's relationship with her husband. After seeing Harriet interact with her husband, Corrie is forced to ask herself if her previous assumptions regarding Harriet's unhappiness were correct, and although Corrie continues to adhere to her materialistic views, she is also aware of something else—love without limitations.

Unable to see beyond class structure or material wealth, Corrie is perplexed by Harriet's love for a man who appears to have little material wealth or promise. In fact, the gesture she witnesses between Harriet and her husband forces Corrie to think about the love she has for her own husband and whether or not she would be able to stay with Jim "if he went to pieces" (Brown,"The Gesture" 194). Unlike Harriet, Corrie is not in love with her husband but is instead in love with the life he provides for her. As she drives into her neighborhood, Corrie begins to feel comfortable because she is back in her element and the houses she passes are "pretty new houses rather like her own; and thinking of their occupants, Corrie had to smile" (Brown, "The Gesture"194). Corrie admits that she gains a sense of security and acceptance from her surrounding community and feels a sense of comfort just by viewing "pretty new houses" (Brown, "The Gesture" 194).

While Corrie is separated from Harriet by class, she is also separated by motivation and lifestyle. Content in her safe, convenient, financially stable life, Corrie is unable to fathom the reasons Harriet stays with her husband Bill. Subsequently, the title

of "The Gesture" illuminates the one moment when Corrie is forced to realize the possibility of contentment, independent of wealth and social status. The gesture shared between Harriet and her husband contradicts Corrie's philosophy regarding life and happiness. There is a prevailing sense of sadness that becomes evident when one compares Corrie's situation to Harriet's. Selfish and driven by social prejudices, Corrie lives a life that is void of pure love, the type of love that Harriet and her husband share and the type of love that survives even without the promise of wealth or status. Thus, when Corrie drives quickly away from Harriet's house "as if to put the whole thing behind her" (Brown,"The Gesture" 193), she appears to be running away from the possibility of realizing the truth of her own existence. Unwilling to confront her own superficial lifestyle, Corrie rushes home and back into the comforts of her upper-class neighborhood. Although she has achieved a greater awareness regarding the possibilities of love, the prospect of change seems remote for Corrie, but now she knows that, for some people, there is more to life than money and social status.

In all five of these stories, Brown emphasizes the separation that occurs between individuals of different classes. While in her story "The Parlour Tumblers" the two family members are able to overcome their class differences, the characters in "The Barbecue," "Tongues of Flame," "A Good Heart," and "The Gesture," all seem to struggle with the separation they feel from other people who are part of different segments within the social hierarchy. Social status is important in several of Brown's stories, especially since all of her stories are set in small southern communities. No matter what the conflict is or the types of people involved, Brown's stories show what it

is like to live in a society structured around social divisions and classifications. As Brown's characters become aware of their own faults and the faults of the society around them, they discover that certain elements of the human condition always rise above class divisions.

CHAPTER VII

Although love is an emotion expressed throughout many of Brown's stories, in "Disturber of the Peace," "No Sound in the Night," "The Birthday Cake," and "The Lost Love," Brown captures the encompassing power of romantic love as each of her characters experiences the impact of love lost and found. While each of these stories has a different conflict, all of the four stories deal with the effects of romantic love upon an array of diverse characters. As love becomes the single motivation for each of the protagonists, Brown emphasizes the basic human need for love and companionship, regardless of the character's age and circumstance. Suffering from loneliness and isolation, Brown's protagonists are trying to find the comfort and joy of human companionship. Whether they find romantic love or they learn to live without it, Brown's protagonists learn something about themselves and experience a moment of clarity when each is forced to examine either the presence or absence of romantic love.

"Disturber of the Peace" [10] documents one woman's inability to deal honestly with the pain she encounters after her fiancé cancels their engagement. Driven by her need for human compassion, Jeanette, at the outset of the story, is having an affair with her married physician. In the first lines of the story, the limited third-person narrator describes Jeanette pondering the activities of her ex-fiancé Frank as she scrubs herself down in her bathtub in an attempt to "wash off the past half-hour with Dr. Wells"

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[10] First published in the literary journal Grand Street in 1982, the story made a second appearance in Brown's first collection of short stories, Tongues of Flame.

(Brown, Tongues 49). Written in both a series of flashbacks and in the present tense, the story describes the breakup of Jeanette and her fiancé, Jeanette's subsequent affair with a married doctor, and the panic that she experiences when a nearby church prominently displays a luminescent cross as a memorial. Although Jeanette tries to adjust to life without her fiancé, her need for companionship forces her into an unhealthy relationship and also into serious depression. However, when the illuminated cross from the neighborhood church disturbs Jeanette's nightly peace, she reassigns all of her angst and despair onto the brightly shining memorial.

Although Jeanette is having an affair with Dr. Wells, she is uncomfortable with the situation and remains disconnected from him and their secret relationship: "She didn't call him anything, just 'you'" (Brown, Tongues 50). Craving comfort and companionship, Jeanette and Dr. Wells use each other to cure their own loneliness: Jeanette reveals that "Jim Wells was the loneliest person she knew" (Brown, Tongues 53). Like a habit, Jeanette is unable to stop seeing Dr. Wells: "It was as if he brought chocolates, and without wanting candy but desperately wanting something, she would eat nuts, nougats, creams, soothed at the time but sorry later" (Brown, Tongues 50). Desperate for a reprieve from her misery, Jeanette uses her time with Dr. Wells to relieve momentarily her pain. Both Dr. Wells and Jeanette want to feel happiness and satisfaction, and like a craving, both characters desire each other's company, regardless of the consequences.

Jilted by her high school sweetheart and fiancé, Frank, Jeanette is forced to redefine her present life and her future. Jeanette, once consumed by Frank, is now

consumed by his absence as she tries to come to terms with her new, single life. Battling depression and insomnia, Jeanette becomes exasperated when, on the night before Easter, she is kept awake by a glowing cross from the Methodist church across the street. After her breakup with Frank, Jeanette has abandoned church and no longer believes in God. Thus, it is ironic that the cross, a symbol of God, now demands Jeanette's attention and only intensifies Jeanette's pain and anguish. Jeanette reveals her dissension from God when she questions, "Where had God been when Frank was in the French Quarter of New Orleans, falling in love with an 'executive secretary'?" (Brown, Tongues 52). In addition to the internal conflict of Jeanette's psyche, Jeannette struggles with the glowing cross that happens to be attached to the steeple of Frank's church. The cross not only reminds Jeanette of the church and the God she abandoned but is also symbolic of her life with Frank, and in the end, the illuminated cross forces her to come to terms with her life without Frank.

The cross represents the psychological and physical pain Jeannette encounters after her breakup with Frank. Frank's betrayal disturbs Jeanette's peaceful and blissful life; therefore, the cross and the literal disturbance of Jeanette's sleep become the physical manifestations of the pain caused by Frank's abandonment as the anger and grief Jeanette attributes to Frank can be equally transposed upon the cross. In addition, the comments Jeannette directs towards the cross also reveal her feelings regarding her subsequent affair with Dr. Wells: "A surge of protest rose within her. This was too much. This was not fair. She did not deserve to be singled out with a cross" (Brown, Tongues 53). Perhaps feeling guilty for her affair with Dr. Wells, Jeanette feels targeted

for her transgressions. Moreover, Jeanette's comments also represent her anger at God for having allowed her breakup up with Frank to occur. Feeling helpless, Jeannette believes herself to be blameless in both her breakup with Frank and her affair with Dr. Wells. In Jeanette's opinion, "fate had set her up for what had developed" because "she wouldn't even know Dr. Wells, much less be involved with him, if Frank hadn't left her practically at the altar" (Brown, Tongues 53). The cross, therefore, becomes Jeanette's new obsession. Just as she is unable to forget about her breakup with Frank, Jeanette is unable to forget about the image of the cross: "It filled her whole consciousness so that her self, cowed and reduced, could not find a comfortable place in relation. [...] The cross was asking something of her, but even in imagination she could not see herself pick it up to carry" (Brown, Tongues 55). Thus, it becomes apparent that the cross symbolizes more than a physical nuisance as she blames Frank for both the cross and for all the pain she endures in her life.

Brown intertwines the dilemma of the cross with the story of Frank's disloyalty and the subsequent break up that allowed Frank to pursue a life with another woman. Jeannette's anger and bitterness climax as she confronts the source of her pain and calls Frank on the phone. Jeannette complains to him, stating, "You're a Methodist [...] I thought maybe you could do something" (Brown, Tongues 60). Although she is literally complaining about the cross, she is indirectly complaining to Frank about the anguish he has caused her. By calling Frank, Jeanette hopes that, in some way, she can make her pain go away when she tells him, "I didn't know. I thought maybe...You couldn't get them to turn it off, could you?" (Brown, Tongues 60). The cross is a nuisance and a

burden, but so too are the pain and heartache she experiences from her breakup with Frank. Finally, as she realizes the uselessness of the phone call, Jeannette recognizes that she must deal with her sorrow directly. As Jeanette is forced to confront Frank, the source of her pain, she is able finally to look at her future instead of looking at her past. As a result, the closing scene of the story shows Jeannette awash in the light of the cross, looking unswervingly towards the source of her pain, confronting the pain and not running away.

In contrast to "Disturber of the Peace," "No Sound in the Night" [11] is about a man named Bunny and the feelings he develops as he falls in love with his boss. Like many of Brown's other characters, Bunny's love is unrequited yet when he gains the courage to confront the woman he loves, he suddenly realizes that his feelings will never be reciprocated because he is different—he is disabled. In her interview with Susie Paul, Brown comments on Bunny, noting that he is brave "because he knows his limitations. He faces the way things are. He faces his situation" (5). As the story develops and a limited third-person narrator provides access to Bunny's thoughts and feelings, Brown describes the joy and the torment her protagonist endures as he works beside, and secretly admires, a woman who will never know or return his feelings of love.

For Bunny, his feelings of love slowly increase as he develops a friendship with his boss, Jean. When Jean takes over the newspaper, the older men who work there, Ed and Henshaw, are skeptical, but when they see her work and get to know her personally, the entire office, including Bunny, is enthusiastic about her presence. In the opening of

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[11] Written during Brown's early years as a writer, the story first appeared in the Carolina Quarterly in the 1958-1959 edition of the journal. After going through several textual changes, the story appeared in Brown's latest edition of short stories, It Wasn't All Dancing.

the story, Brown contrasts Bunny and Jean, noting that while Bunny knows her from town, they are vastly different individuals. While "she sailed on through" grade school and high school, Bunny "had to give up on school" (Brown, It Wasn't 49). Used to being unnoticed and ignored, Bunny, who is conscious of his "long front teeth, little watery eyes, and hands like paws," is surprised when Jean asks to join him for lunch (Brown, It Wasn't 50). The first day they eat together, the narrator reveals that Bunny is "proud, not embarrassed to be walking with a girl for the first time in his entire thirty-two years" (Brown, It Wasn't 50). Jean looks beyond Bunny's disability and unknowingly gives him a chance to feel proud as she allows him to experience his first public outing with a female other than his mother. While inconsequential to most people, for Bunny this experience allows him to forget about his disability as he finally has the chance to feel like a man sharing a moment with a woman. As their first lunch progresses, Bunny and Jean share a lively conversation, and when Bunny makes Jean laugh, he gains a sense of satisfaction because he realizes that he is capable of making her happy. While Bunny is used to simply fading into the background and keeping quiet, with Jean, Bunny is able to have a conversation and is able to contribute to her happiness just as she unknowingly contributes to his. With Jean, Bunny feels like a full, complete person. Without her, Bunny is insignificant, not just to himself but also to others. Thus, in contrast to his lunches with Jean, when Bunny shows up to Luke's diner without her, the narrator reveals, "Nobody waved at Bunny on the way to Luke's without Jean. Luke's glance slid over him as if he wasn't even there. Without Jean, he was only a dollar bill for the cash register" (Brown, It Wasn't 54). This scene further demonstrates the intensity of Bunny's

feelings when he is with Jean: not only does he feel alive, but when he is with her, people notice he is alive. Without Jean, Bunny is invisible, ignored and unacknowledged as a man or even a person.

Although physically disabled, Bunny's demonstrates his craving for love and his desire to feel loved by a woman. Throughout his life, Bunny repeatedly has dreams in which he is stuck in a situation, struggling to do something he cannot do. When Jean comes into Bunny's life, Bunny's regular dreams become altered, and instead of being stuck, Bunny dreams that Jean saves him from his confusion: "He was trying so hard he thought he would burst with effort, when suddenly Jean Goodwyn was there. She picked up his paper, typed off the answers in rattling haste and handed back the paper with a smile. For the first time, he was saved before waking up" (Brown, It Wasn't 52). When he dreams about Jean at night, he envisions her as his guiding spirit, the one person who can help him solve all his problems. Bunny's dream represents what he believes to be Jean's saving presence in his life. After dealing with lifelong disappointments and struggles, their friendship makes him feel like a normal man, unburdened by his handicap. Thus, just as she saves him in his dream, in real life, Bunny's relationship with Jean gives him hope that perhaps he can one day experience reciprocated, romantic love.

As Bunny and Jean's friendship develops, so too do Bunny's romantic feelings for Jean. Noting that Bunny's feelings for Jean have moved beyond friendship, the limited third-person narrator describes the excitement and anticipation Bunny feels when he is around Jean: "His heart was like a seed deep in the dirt, beginning to swell and push up. [...] All he wanted was to see her" (Brown, It Wasn't 52). Brown's vivid simile

captures the pangs of Bunny's early love and adoration for Jean. Like any person enamored by another, Bunny structures his life around Jean, anticipating their daily lunches with excitement. However, when Jean becomes engaged to her boyfriend Bob Carter, Bunny hopes, for his own sake, that their engagement might not last.

When Jean uncovers a local murder story about a woman shooting her dishonest boyfriend, the newspaper staff is abuzz. When Henshaw makes the comment, "That's what love is, temporary insanity," Bunny refuses to laugh at the remark because "he didn't want them to badmouth love" (Brown, It Wasn't 57). With this revelation, the narrator reveals Bunny's sensitivity and his own fantasy involving a future with Jean. Devoted to Jean and protective of his feelings for her, Bunny reveals, through his internal reflection, that he wants to believe in the power of love. For Bunny, love is the only thing that can make Jean overlook his disability. However, Henshaw's comment foretells Bunny's pending realization: to confront Jean with his love would be a mistake. Thus, the majority of the story shows Bunny experiencing his own temporary fantasy regarding a life with Jean. As Jean suffers through the breakup with her fiancé, Bunny suffers through his own emotional turmoil as he becomes more obsessed with Jean. Brown contrasts Jean's struggle to get over love with Bunny's struggle to manage his love for her:

> Bunny became more and more possessed. He had no words for what he felt. He only knew it was with him day and night. In his bed in the back room, he slept and waked, imagining himself holding Jean's hand, putting his arm around her.

> Beyond that even his daydream wouldn't go, for a long-buried memory rose up to stop them. (Brown, It Wasn't 61)

Consumed by his feelings for Jean, Bunny is both confused as to what his feelings mean and to what they might lead him to do. Although he loves Jean, Bunny is aware of his condition, and a childhood memory cautions him to be careful when professing his love to her. When Bunny remembers a situation where, as a child, he tried to kiss a young girl, he is reminded of both his personal humiliation and the pain he suffered after he became aware that the little girl was repulsed and did not want to reciprocate his feelings. Regardless of this painful childhood memory, Bunny is compelled to share his feelings with Jean and decides to confess his love to her one evening after work. Excited and anxious, Bunny hurries home, cleans himself, and runs back out the door in an attempt to catch Jean alone in the office. As he runs through the town, "the darkness reassured him. In the night, he might have been any other fellow on his way to see a girl" (Brown, It Wasn't 63). There, in that moment, Bunny feels like a normal man because the darkness of the night hides his flaws. However, as Bunny approaches the newspaper office, his determination begins to lag as the reality of what he is about to do besieges him and forces him to reconsider. Suddenly, Bunny comes to a realization and, as Brown notes in her interview with Susie Paul, realizes his limits. He suddenly feels ashamed of his short-lived confidence: "The truth sank in like a weight, pushing his heart back in place and slowing his pounding pulses. As if caught at something shameful, he turned to see if anyone was watching. No one was, so he started back down the street, looking both ways like a runaway colt" (Brown, It Wasn't 64). The image Brown creates as Bunny comes

to this realization is both sad and laudable, sad because no matter how desperately Bunny wants love, he never gets the opportunity to experience a romantic relationship with Jean. Yet, at the same time, this scene demonstrates Bunny's bravery when Bunny, aware of not just his own feelings but also of Jean's, is able to control his emotions and saves himself and Jean from a painful situation. Thus, no matter how painful it is, Bunny represses his love for Jean because he realizes the limits of his condition.

Bunny is both miserable and brave as he walks away from the newspaper office. When he enters the drug store, Bunny picks out some comic books and is greeted by the cashier with the question, "What's the good word, Bunny?" (Brown, It Wasn't 65). Bunny responds by simply stating, "I don't know it" (Brown, It Wasn't 65). This dialogue between the cashier and Bunny simplifies Bunny's inner conflict. Although the cashier is only using a generic greeting to welcome Bunny, the notion that there is, perhaps, a "good word" is ironic in this situation. If the "good word" is love, then Bunny does not know it, and his response is appropriate and somewhat symbolic of his own loveless fate. As Bunny leaves the store and walks down the street, he reverts into his accustomed role:

> A gentle breeze lifted a tuft of carefully combed hair and dropped it down on his forehead, where it seemed to belong. He walked fast to put the heart of town behind him, then moved slowly down the street toward the little house they'd rented for so many years. His footsteps on the sidewalk made no sound in the night. (Brown, It Wasn't 65).

As his hair becomes tousled by the breeze, Bunny becomes the familiar Bunny everyone knows but ignores. His hair, not usually combed back, falls back into its natural place just as Bunny also falls back into his natural place. The image of Bunny walking away from the "heart of the town" symbolizes his movement away the object of his own heart—Jean. The final image of Bunny rushing home, silently, indiscernible, symbolizes his return to anonymity and his return into the world of a disabled man. Limited by his disability, Bunny is unable to be the person he wants to be. Although the scene of Bunny walking away from town is sad, Bunny is also a gallant character as he realizes the limits of his situation and quietly returns to the life he had before he knew love.

Like her other stories focusing on love, Brown's story "The Birthday Cake" [12] again explores the correlation between loneliness and romantic love as her character, an older woman named Fern, is confronted both by a possible marriage proposal and the death of her close friend. Fern's thoughts shift from past and present, to future as she tries to reach a decision about her future with her boyfriend. Struggling with her past marriage and the infidelities of her late husband, Fern must decide if she is willing to forego her comfortable existence and take another chance at marriage. However, Brown uses the backdrop of a funeral to serve as an element of contrast for Fern and her impending fate. While the funeral represents the closing of one person's life, the death of Fern's friend, Sadie, reiterates the fortune of those still living and becomes a turning point for Fern as she gains a clear perspective of what she wants in both love and life.

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[12] Published first in 1991 in the Threepenny Review, the story's most recent publication is in Brown's latest collection, Tongues of Flame.

Fern is an older woman who has recently rediscovered romantic love and is in the middle of a courtship with a man she met on a trip for senior citizens. However, after learning of Sadie's sudden death, Fern is forced to postpone her date with her boyfriend, Charles. When the narrator reveals that, regardless of her fading memory, Fern feels "young and happy" (Brown, It Wasn't 66), Brown emphasizes Fern's age and the happiness she feels as a result of her relationship. However, Fern's feelings quickly change as she is suddenly reminded of her age and the circumstances surrounding the aging process when she receives a phone call from her sister, Maud, announcing the death of their close friend Sadie. Fern's reaction is somewhat selfish and callous as she realizes that Sadie's death has interrupted her dinner plans with Charles. Anticipating a marriage proposal from Charles, Fern is initially disappointed that her date will have to be postponed. Although friends with Sadie, Fern has grown accustomed to dealing with the death of friends. Fern's response to Sadie's death demonstrates the desensitization that occurs when one experiences death frequently as, instead of being shocked, Fern is more aware of the inconvenience than the actual loss of life. Contemplating how she will balance her date with Charles and Sadie's funeral, Fern realizes the impact of Sadie's death after she gets off the phone with her sister. However, while one moment Fern's inner reflection reveals her shock and grief, "Sadie, of all people! Like the Rock of Gibraltar" (Brown, It Wasn't 67), in the next moment Fern is reminded of her own health and continued existence: "Fern took a deep breath and released it. She was still here, thank God. She'd be perfectly happy to stay on forever if she didn't see everyday, what was happening to Maude Ellen, ten years her senior" (Brown, It Wasn't 67). As the story

continues and Brown uses Sadie's death as a point of contrast to Fern's future, Brown's frequent shifts, from past, present, to future, reiterate the instability and fragility of human life.

The story is a commentary not just on one woman's life but is a commentary on the problems and struggles of many elderly people. As Fern reveals her concerns about aging, she presents some of the general concerns facing elderly people. Although not yet in the late, elderly stages of her life, Fern looks at her older sister and her friends and is reminded of what is to come: "old people were getting to be a problem all over. For every one who died, several more lived on, to be eighty, ninety, sometimes a hundred" (Brown, It Wasn't 67). As the limited third-person narrator reveals Fern's thoughts, readers are able to gain insight into Fern's concerns regarding her own fate. As Fern comments on the increase in the elderly population, she simultaneously draws attention to herself and her own predicament as an aging woman. Concerned about her own situation, Fern reveals that the increase in the elderly population is both good and bad for her. First, it is good because she wants to keep on living; however, it is bad because while Fern "would be perfectly happy to stay on forever" (Brown, It Wasn't 67), she is ultimately alone and, other than her sister, Fern has no one to grow old with. Thus, when Fern meets Charles, she must decide if her loneliness and her love for Charles are enough to make her take another chance with marriage and romantic love, especially since she is still cognizant of the pain she experienced when she uncovered her first husband's infidelity.

Throughout the story, Brown contrasts Fern's relationship with Charles with the life of and death of Sadie. As Brown's narrator reveals the details of Fern's first meeting with Charles, the reader discovers that Fern has gone on the trip as a favor to a friend and because "it was spring and she'd been...well, lonely" (Brown, It Wasn't 68). Although their courtship appears rather brief, Fern is positive that Charles is on the verge of a marriage proposal. However, Fern is unsure about marriage and is somewhat uncomfortable with the institution because "marriage was the chanciest thing on earth, she'd found out" (Brown, It Wasn't 68). Thus, immediately after the narrator recounts Fern and Charles' meeting and their movement towards marriage, the topic of the story jumps from one subject to the next as Fern begins contemplating the life of Sadie. Just as her thoughts shift from one subject to another, her mind shifts again, this time focusing on the early years of her marriage and the specific moment she discovers her husband's adultery. As Fern's disjointed thoughts are revealed, Brown uses this intertwining of past, present, and future in order to convey the confusion Fern feels regarding her life, especially her future. As she shifts from thoughts of Sadie, to Charles, to her previous marriage, Fern is able to view life in a variety of stages. The memories of her previous marriage remind Fern of the pain she endured for years and, thus, caution her from making the same mistake twice. However, her thoughts of Charles represent the possibility for her future, a future that could be void of loneliness but could also be a risky venture for someone already hurt by a previous marriage. Finally, Fern's thoughts of Sadie remind her of the blessing and the brevity of life as she feels both grateful for life but aware of its fragility.

While Fern admits her feelings for Charles, Fern struggles with the decision of marriage and whether or not she is willing to risk her comfortable yet lonely existence for another chance at love. As she recollects her marriage with her first husband, Fern describes both the pain and the power of love: "she loved him. She'd stood up in church, a virgin in a white veil of illusion, and made vows, brought his children into the world. How could she take it all back?" (Brown, It Wasn't 70). Torn between her love for her husband and his continued adultery, Fern is filled with painful memories of her first marriage that force her to question her own appeal as a wife. Thus, as she reflects on her marriage, Fern confronts not only her husband's deceit but also her own feelings of insecurity: "Why would Robert need or want someone else, if she hadn't failed as a wife?" (Brown, It Wasn't 73). As she thinks about her future with Charles, Fern is very conscious of the "heartache" that occurs and is "even to be expected" when one enters a relationship (Brown, It Wasn't 73).

As Fern sits at Sadie's funeral and contemplates her future with Charles, she realizes that life, no matter how careful a person is, is full of both beauty and pain. When the minister begins his eulogy for Sadie, he describes his first meeting with Sadie and the words she gave to him as a new, young minister in the parish: "This is a good place to be, as good as any, but don't expect it to be easy. Don't even want it to be easy, because then you wouldn't grow!" (Brown, It Wasn't 74). The words Sadie speaks to the minister are applicable to Fern's life as well. Comfortable yet lonely, Fern is hesitant to take a chance with Charlie. However, Sadie's words remind Fern of her younger years when Fern was more daring and willing to try new things. As Fern stands by Maude at

the funeral, Fern comes to the realization that she needs more than just her sister to keep her company—Fern realizes that she wants and needs love:

> It was a lonely feeling, even with Maude Ellen beside her. Sisters went only so far, she supposed. It was Charles that she wanted and needed. She thought of his eyes that had seen so much (and still no glasses!), his fine physician's hands. With his silver hair, he looked what he was, a Southern gentleman.
>
> (Brown, It Wasn't 76)

At this moment, Fern comes to the understanding that she wants the companionship of a man in her life; she realizes that she craves romantic love and needs to seize the opportunity she has to make it a possibility.

As Fern drives home from Sadie's funeral, she passes her late husband's old dental office. Remodeled and with a new exterior, the building symbolizes Fern's life, which is also about to receive some changes. When she walks through her door, her phone is ringing, and she is confident that it is Charles calling to make sure she is okay. Like so many of Brown's other stories, "The Birthday Cake" ends abruptly, with an image of Fern looking at the cake she has made for her boyfriend's birthday. Although Brown never explicitly tells the reader what happens next between Fern and Charles, Fern's realizations throughout Sadie's funeral are evidence of her love and desire to be with Charles for the rest of her life. The final image of the cake represents Fern's future with Charles:

> There on the counter was his cake. On the footed glass stand, it was under cover now, but she knew how it looked under there. Pristine white over that dark

> chocolate heart, as tempting as when she'd made it. She hadn't taken his cake to Sadie's after all. There'd been enough desserts, and cakes of all kinds, without it. (Brown, It Wasn't 78)

Fern knows that she will eventually share the cake and her future with Charlie. The cake, which symbolizes her relationship with Charles, foreshadows his eventual visit and proposal of marriage to Fern. Fern has "never had a cake turn out better" (Brown, It Wasn't 67). Thus, although Brown leaves her protagonist's situation unsettled, the cake and the beauty it displays predict Fern's future with Charles.

In contrast to the aforementioned stories that are based in a purely realistic setting, Brown's short story "The Lost Love" [13] begins with a man who, looking down upon his own funeral, remembers his troubled life with his wife Virginia. Although the story follows a similar format where her protagonist achieves a greater understanding, it is hard to decipher exactly what lesson the protagonist learns. Overall, "The Lost Love" is a story about love and the pain that follows when love is lost. The story focuses on one man's idea of love and the loneliness he suffers throughout his life both as a child and as an adult. As the story's main character, Breck Lee, watches his own funeral proceed, the story flashes back to Breck's childhood as a third-person limited narrator provides a detailed, one-sided account of Breck's life, from his early memories up until his death. While the story presents a timeline of his life, the main plot focuses on the relationship Breck shares with Virginia and the pain she causes him as she has several adulterous relationships with other men throughout their marriage.

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[13] Published in the early years of Mary Ward Brown's career, this story is a departure from her normal style, which has a heavy emphasis on realistic setting and plot structure. The story was published in November 1959 in the journal Four Quarters and was never published again.

As Breck looks down upon his family and friends, he comments on the setting of his funeral and the appearance of his family members in attendance. When Breck sees his ex-wife Virginia, his comments regarding her hat are the first hint that their previous relationship was driven by Virginia's happiness: "Her little hat cost plenty, he knew. He had enjoyed paying Virginia's outlandish bills. It got to be the only thing she let him do without intimating that someone else could do it better" (Brown, "The Lost" 25). Progressing through the service, Breck is unable to focus on anything other than Virginia, forcing him to evaluate his life and the time he spent with her. As Breck comments on the love he had for Virginia, he reveals, "Love for her had wrecked him, but now that he was relieved of that, he was mostly dismayed. Had he lived and died a horrible example without teaching her anything at all?" (Brown, "The Lost" 25). When Breck wonders if he taught Virginia anything, his statement is somewhat confusing because readers are forced to ask themselves about the type of lesson Breck wants to teach his ex-wife. Is Breck, perhaps, wanting to set an example and be helpful to his wife, or is Breck insinuating that he wants to teach his wife a lesson in the vindictive sense of the phrase because he wants to make her feel guilty for leaving him? As the story progresses, it becomes evident that as Breck and his wife encounter difficulties in their marriage, Breck becomes increasingly obsessed by his own success. Thus, the main plot of this story focuses on Breck as he discovers that his definition of love was never quite right to begin with.

After Breck watches his funeral, the third-person limited narrator moves back in time and describes Breck's lonely childhood where he has no sense or feeling of true love

until he meets Virginia. Growing up without a mother and father, Breck is raised by his grandparents and never experiences familial love. Instead, the earliest memories of Breck's childhood are of himself alone. Although constantly aware of his loneliness, Breck notes that "He didn't recall feeling unhappy though. [...] When he had a problem he kept it to himself" (Brown, "The Lost" 26). Keeping his problems to himself is a habit that plagues Breck throughout his lifetime and eventually causes him to fall into alcoholism. However, wealthy and alone in the world, Breck falls in love with a town socialite named Virginia and the two get married. After their marriage, Breck pursues a career as a writer because, although he has significant personal wealth, he wants to have some form of employment. Breck attempts to begin a career as a writer but is initially unsuccessful. When he begins writing about his romance with Virginia, he finally achieves his first big success, and in celebration of his success, Virginia steps in and fulfills her role as wife and socialite when she throws Breck a party. After the party, the narrator reveals that Breck and Virginia experience their first marital friction as Virginia becomes resentful when she reminds Breck that she "can still have a party" (Brown, "The Lost" 27) even if Breck never publishes again. As the narrator explains, "In the face of her own success, his was forgotten" (Brown, "The Lost" 27).

Breck spends the rest of their marriage trying to repeat his first success. Predicting their future unhappiness, the narrator goes on to reveal that after tension arises between Breck and Virginia, "Virginia was ready to tear away, just a little. And because she wearied of high romance, Breck thought she wearied of him. He was like an officer stripped of his rank" (Brown, "The Lost" 27). Proud of his contributions and his artistry,

Breck is crushed when Virginia fails to see the importance of his own success. Brown slowly introduces the reason for Breck's comment regarding Virginia in the beginning of the story. As Breck loses favor in Virginia's eyes, Breck is compelled to prove both himself and his work to her. As a result, Breck spends the rest of their marriage trying to impress Virginia and prove to her that his presence is a significant part of her own contentment.

After Virginia throws Breck a party for the publication of his story, their lives change as they enter into the social scene, and Virginia becomes a town socialite, involving herself with several organizations and social events. As Virginia occupies herself with social functions, the narrator reveals that Breck becomes jealous and "tried to hide his jealousy behind a busy, literary front" (Brown, "The Lost" 27). Breck refuses to show his feelings and instead endures the pain. Already used to a life of loneliness, Breck's jealousy is either caused by Virginia's success or stems from his own desire for her attention, especially since she spends a lot of time away from Breck. When Virginia is pregnant with their first child, Breck becomes hopeful because he believes that, because of her pregnancy, "She [Virginia] would need him. She would be fat and round-faced and sick" (Brown, "The Lost" 28). However, the pregnancy brings no change in Virginia's behavior, and Breck's attempts at securing Virginia's happiness fail as she becomes less involved and more distant. After the birth of their daughter Bitsy, Breck buys Virginia a diamond ring and takes control of the baby's care when Virginia becomes too tired after her various social engagements: "he often felt that he lived in a nightmare where Virginia moved farther and farther away. His efforts to please began to bring

indifference or contempt. Resistance brought cold anger" (Brown, "The Lost" 28). As their marriage progresses and Breck tries to regain some of their previous happiness, Virginia turns away from Breck's advances and returns to the social scene. As his romance with Virginia falls apart, so too does Breck's ability to write about love. Driven by his love for Virginia, Breck uses their relationship as the inspiration for his work and his own success. Virginia's loss of interest in the romance of their marriage hurts him both personally and professionally. Alone through most of his life, Breck struggles to find a way to hold on to the only person he has ever loved. Thus, when Breck discovers Virginia kissing another man, Breck reverts to alcohol because he does not know how to handle the situation without pushing the woman he loves away.

When Virginia tries to apologize for her adulterous actions by telling Breck that "It didn't mean anything," her feelings change from regret to anger when Breck responds to her apology with a complacent, "I know" (Brown, "The Lost" 29). Virginia retorts, "No, you don't [...] You're just morbid and jealous and want to feel sorry for yourself" (Brown, "The Lost" 29). While Breck experiences intense jealousy, he refuses to act upon his emotions, and although he is upset, Breck never becomes irate. Instead, after Breck witnesses Virginia's unfaithfulness, his jealousy simply grows as he becomes more skeptical of his wife's friends: "every new acquaintance was now a potential lover for Virginia. Every old friend was suspect. He was like a man with a fatal disease waiting for death" (Brown ,"The Lost" 30). Scared that Virginia might leave him for someone else, Breck uses alcohol to separate himself from the possibility of aloneness and life without love. His writing, like his alcohol, becomes another outlet where Breck tries to

hide the grim reality of his failing marriage. Again, Breck repeats the notion that he wants to prove his worth to Virginia when the narrator reveals, "his determination to succeed grew and enlarged out of normal proportion. If he could sell and become famous, he reasoned, Virginia might be sorry. She would be forced to respect him at least" (Brown, "The Lost" 30). As Breck struggles to recapture Virginia's respect and love, he begins to lose sight of what sincere love feels like and what it is about. As he hopes to impress her with his skills and his accomplishments, Breck sinks even further into alcoholism and depression. Trying to blind himself from another one of Virginia's adulterous affairs, Breck continues to drink himself numb and, as a result, ends up in a treatment facility. While at the facility, Breck's reveals his own fears and misconceptions about love:

> It was a fact that Virginia had failed him, but she was only human and anyone else might have done the same. Besides, if she had loved him as he wished, she might have died and left him. He would have lost her all the same. And again, if she had loved him as he wished, he might have wearied of her, or so he tried to think. (Brown, "The Lost" 31)

Breck reveals both his fears regarding love and the pain he has contained within himself. So used to being alone and because of the loss of his parents, Breck is somewhat fearful of true love. If Breck believes that love equates to loss, then perhaps Breck, throughout his marriage, has inadvertently sabotaged his own marriage and ruined his chance at experiencing real, constant love. Inept at love and unable to know how to respond to it, Breck uses alcohol to help him fake his way through his life and his marriage. Confused

about love, Breck admits that "he couldn't blame Virginia. He must blame some weakness in himself, some inability to cope with his own inordinate, misplaced love" (Brown, "The Lost" 31). Breck's love for Virginia represents his first experience with love, yet never having close family or friends, Breck is unable to know how to act toward a person he loves, and, at the same time, he does not know how the other person should act. As a result, when Virginia leaves Breck, Breck is again abandoned and lonely, and his views on love and life remain intact until he dies.

In the story's conclusion, Breck is in a conversation with his guardian angel about love. As Breck tells the angel that his only true concern in life was Virginia, the angel corrects Breck by noting, "As a matter of fact it was yourself you loved in Virginia, your own likings, taste, desires" (Brown, "The Lost" 32). This comment suggests Breck's desire to impress Virginia throughout their marriage. As Breck continually tries to "teach," or show, Virginia what he is worth, Breck feels that he fails miserably because he is never able to make Virginia fully dependent on him. When the angel comments that Breck only loved what he saw of himself in Virginia, the angel is reiterating the notion that Breck should have loved her for who she was and not for what she needed. Therefore, Breck's loneliness and depression result from his inability to allow Virginia independence or sovereignty, for Breck wanted Virginia's happiness to be dependent on him. The angel explains the meaning of love further: "Now and then someone goes beyond personal attachments" (Brown, "The Lost" 2). It is not surprising that Breck wants to stay with Virginia even after the infidelities because Breck is not in love with her; he is in love with her presence, her role as his wife. When Breck asks the angel, "I

missed the whole point, didn't I? " the angel responds, "I'm afraid you did [...]. Tomorrow we'll see a few others you might have helped along. Some are sick, some hungry, some just lonely like you were" (Brown, "The Lost" 32). Lonely and always craving love, throughout his life, Breck does anything he can to fend off the loneliness. In the final lines of the story, Breck asks that the angel not show him any more people like himself because "he could see them already, the whole human race" (Brown, "The Lost" 32). Unlike many of the other stories, in the final line of this story, Brown appears to make a more deliberate example of her protagonist as she uses him as a model for the shortcomings of the entire human race. While all of her stories deliver a lesson about humanity and the various internal and external conflicts a person faces, Brown's message is always displayed through the changes of her protagonists. However, in this story, the final line is more notably didactic as it makes an obvious statement about the theme of the story in regards to the entire human race. Thus, the message garnered through this tale is one of general appreciation for the loved ones in a person's life. However, like so many of Brown's protagonists, Breck learns his lesson—the meaning of true love—when it is too late for him. As in Brown's other stories, the protagonist experiences that moment of sudden realization, and in this case, the realization comes after death and leaves Breck only to wonder what his life could have been like if he had only realized what it meant to experience and give real love.

While love can either bring pain or joy, all of the protagonists in Brown's stories suffer through loneliness when love is removed from their lives. As her characters struggle to cope with the loneliness of a life void of romantic love and companionship,

each of her characters is forced to come to terms with their situation, whether it is to choose love like Fern in "The Birthday Cake," or to move forward without love like the character Jeanette in "Disturber of the Peace." In each of the four stories, "Disturber of the Peace," "The Lost Love," "No Sound in the Night," and "The Birthday Cake," all of Brown's main characters are motivated by their desire for romantic love, yet each character has a unique situation. Regardless of the character or the conflict presented, all of Brown's characters in these stories desire companionship, and in each story, the main conflict ensues around a person's desire to share and receive love. Characters like Jeanette, Bunny, and Breck experience unrequited love as they are all let down or turned away by the people they love the most. In contrast, the character Fern in "The Birthday Cake" is a woman who finally accepts love but is initially hesitant because of the pain she endured throughout her previous marriage to an unfaithful man. Regardless of conflict or circumstance, Brown's stories show both the pain and the joy associated with love and the tenacious desire for all human beings to attain it.

CHAPTER VIII

The theme of personal sacrifice is prevalent throughout many of Brown's short stories. While some characters sacrifice certain aspects of their own happiness for the happiness of others, other characters act selfishly, refusing to forfeit any aspect of their own contentment. In the stories focusing on personal sacrifice, Brown often contrasts both the selfish and selfless characters in an attempt to emphasize the distinct motivations that set these two types of people apart. In some stories, Brown focuses on the deeds of specific individuals and reiterates the significance of deliberate choice as her characters become distinguished by the choices they make. In "It Wasn't All Dancing," "Once in a Lifetime," "The House that Asa Built," "Good-Bye, Cliff," and "Last of the Species," Brown explores both the self-sacrifice and the selfishness of specific characters who either fail or excel in their prescribed roles as either mother, spouse, significant other, and even employee. Each of the stories discusses personal sacrifice, and the turning point in each story captures Brown's protagonist in the midst of change or realization. While some characters discover information, other characters are forever affected by the decisions they make—whether their decisions be selfish or selfless. As stories like "Once in a Lifetime" and "Good-Bye, Cliff" document the self-sacrifice of Brown's female protagonists, other stories like "The House that Asa Built" and "It Wasn't All Dancing" offer a different perspective on how selfishness affects the family dynamic. While the other four stories discuss selfishness and self-sacrifice within the family environment,

Brown's short story "Last of the Species" explores one woman's refusal to sacrifice her own beliefs for a man, demonstrating the difference between self-respect and selfishness.

In "It Wasn't All Dancing," [14] Brown describes the life of a woman who, absorbed with her own happiness throughout much of her life, is neglected by her daughter and is essentially left to die alone under the care of a hired maid. Initially viewed as a somewhat selfish society woman, Rose Merriweather becomes a sympathetic character as the reader discovers that she has actually made one significant sacrifice in her life. When the story begins, Rose wakes up to discover a new nurse named Etta working in her home. Used to new faces and new help, Rose shows little concern when she discovers that her previous nurse is gone. The story is primarily told from Rose's perspective through a third-person narrator who provides access to Rose's internal commentary. In addition to the physical absence of family, Rose's internal observations frequently reveal the division between Rose and her daughter, especially when Rose comments on Catherine's reaction to good china: "Well, Catherine wouldn't want those dishes anyway, just because they'd been hers [Rose's]" (Brown, It Wasn't 2). Like so many of Brown's other stories, character conflict and history are revealed through internal commentary and through observations made by a narrator. Slowly, the tension that exists between Rose and her daughter is uncovered as Rose unabashedly shares her memories of her past with Etta.

When Rose meets Etta, Brown contrasts the two women: Rose is symbolic of the past, and Etta is representative of the present. Rose, a product of the old, pre-Civil Rights

[14] "It Wasn't All Dancing" was first published in the literary journal Grand Street in 1988 and, as a result, was selected to appear in the anthology New Stories From the South: The Year's Best, 1989. In addition, in 1995 the story appeared in the anthology Alabama Bound: Contemporary Stories of a State.

era, continually reveals her adherence to a past way of life. On their first day together Rose demonstrates both her stereotypical views and her need for human companionship when she panics after questioning Etta about her china. When Etta comments on Rose's china, Rose thus insinuates that Etta is snooping through Rose's cabinets. In response to Rose's questioning, Etta confronts Rose's suspicions when she states, "You thinking about do I steal" (Brown, It Wasn't 3). Although she is confused about Etta's reaction to her comments, Rose panics because she realizes that she has upset Etta: "Heavenly days! Rose thought. How did that come about? And what if she quit? Rose was ready to explain, apologize, beg if necessary. Anything not to lose her" (Brown, It Wasn't 4). From Rose's comments, it becomes apparent that she is a very lonely old lady who has no one other than her nurse for companionship. Fortunately, Etta realizes Rose's situation and does not take any of Etta's comments too seriously or view them as malicious. When Rose asks Etta, "I don't guess you could say 'yes, ma'am, could you? Would that set back the whole Movement?" Rose demonstrates both her age and her assumed superiority (Brown, It Wasn't 5). While most people would view the question as bold, the comment simply dates Rose to another era, an era where she was the master and Etta was the servant.

Rose and Etta develop a very informal friendship as Etta openly asks Rose about her life and her family. Ordinarily, Rose's open conversation with Etta would have been received with shock and indignation; however, Rose is getting old and the companionship she has with Etta is all she has. An unlikely pair, Etta and Rose are vastly different in every possible way. Etta, a working woman who waits on Rose every moment of the

day, knows a lot about sacrifice. While she is friendly with Rose, early on in their relationship Etta sacrifices some of her pride as she endures Rose's degrading comments. Rose, on the other hand, knows little about personal sacrifice, and as Rose slowly reveals her past to Etta, the two become better acquainted. When Rose asks Etta what she wants out of life, Etta responds "My mama told me to don't want nothing, just take what God send and be thankful. [...] Sometime He send a little satisfaction along. I be looking out for that" (Brown, It Wasn't 14). Rose compliments Etta by telling Etta that her company has provided Rose with that little bit of satisfaction Etta's mother talked about. For unlike Etta, Rose's discussion about her past reiterates her inability to find satisfaction. Instead, she spends most of her life looking for something better, and when she finds that one person who fulfills her dreams, Rose makes perhaps the only sacrifice of her life when she refuses to marry him.

Alone in her old age, Rose has a strained relationship with her daughter because Rose never fulfilled the motherly role. Instead of being a good mother and wife, the younger Rose was more concerned with her social life and the party scene. Once a beauty and a young woman of high society, Rose was never able to commit to her motherly duties. As Etta begins to ask Rose about her relationship with her daughter, Rose tells Etta, "I was no mother to anybody. I was out being the belle of the ball myself. I went off and left her with any black woman who'd sleep on a cot in her room. She has every reason to feel the way she does toward me" (Brown, It Wasn't 9). As Rose admits to abandoning her daughter, it also becomes apparent that her daughter is now abandoning Rose. As a mother, Rose has failed and as a result of her failure, Rose has no

personal relationship with her daughter. The more Rose clings to Etta and the more Rose opens up, the more it becomes apparent that Catherine resents her mother and her failure as a parent. Rose tells Etta that Catherine's memories of her mother are of leaving and coming back from parties: "Do you know what she remembers most about me, as a child? [...] A few smells, she says. Gardenias from my corsages. Hot cheese in the canapés I served at parties. [...] Chanel Number Five as I went out the door, then alcohol and cigarettes when I came in her room late at night" (Brown, It Wasn't 9). Rebelling from her own memory of her mother, Catherine, Rose reveals, is "Everything I wasn't" (Brown, It Wasn't 9). Because the mother and daughter have a detached relationship, Catherine makes decisions regarding Rose's welfare without Rose's consent. Therefore, when Rose discovers that Catherine might be making a "change-up" by sending Rose to a nursing home, Rose is worried because she does not want to leave her home or Etta (Brown, It Wasn't 8). Catherine's actions continue to cause Rose grief when Rose discovers that her daughter plans on selling some of the antiques. Thus, Catherine's unexplained actions force Rose to confront the mistakes she made as mother. As a young mother, Rose failed when she was unable to sacrifice her own happiness for the happiness and security of her daughter. Now, older and unable to change the past, Rose is forced to deal with the consequences of her mistakes as she is forced to spend her last days without the presence of family.

When Etta questions Rose about her past, Rose not only uncovers her failures as a mother, but Etta also learns that Rose struggled with her role as a wife. Again, just as she was uncomfortable with her motherly duties, Rose reveals that she was not content in her

prescribed spousal role. While Rose tells Etta that she was a wild girl in her earlier days, Rose's inner reflection divulges the extent of her wildness: "She had flirted, Rose thought, with too many; but it was only a game. To test her powers, she supposed. Once, though, it hadn't been flirting, and it hadn't been a game" (Brown, It Wasn't 7). This comment exemplifies Rose's selfish nature, her desire to be the focus of attention, and her tendency to forego her commitments as both a mother and a wife in order to make herself feel desired. Consumed by her own status, Rose is driven not by her responsibilities but by the momentary happiness she receives when she gains someone's attention and, therefore, is reassured of her physical beauty. However, while Rose describes the selfishness of her younger years, she also notes that "Something finally brought me down, but it was a long time coming, I'm afraid" (Brown, It Wasn't 6). Driven by her own popularity, Rose finally realizes the seriousness of her flirtations when she falls in love with another man. Although Rose refers to her adulterous relationship, in a conversation with Etta, Rose reveals that even though she continually failed as a mother and a wife, she was able to make one large sacrifice for the welfare of her family when she refused to run away with her lover. Prompted by Catherine's decision to sell some of her antiques, Rose has Etta search for a ring that her lover gave her as a gift. Rose's lover gave Rose the ring, a large sapphire surrounded by diamonds, because "he said it was the color of my eyes" (Brown, It Wasn't 12). As Rose tells Etta about this man, Rose discloses the extent of her love for him: "I love him today, in his grave. But he was married already, with a wife and three children. And I had my own little family. Our paths didn't cross until too late, that's all" (Brown, It Wasn't 12). With a character

like Rose, Brown's readers shift among pity, condemnation, and sympathy as Rose reveals that although she was selfish most of her life, she did, however, make one significant sacrifice. When she reflects on her own marriage, Rose believes, "she'd done a few things right" (Brown, It Wasn't 13). Sitting by her husband through his death, Rose realizes that "It hadn't all been dancing" and that her marriage to her husband Allen was more than a mere show.

Rose reaches a turning point when she tells Etta that their friendship has provided her with happiness and "satisfaction" (Brown, It Wasn't 14) in her final days. Rose's friendship with Etta has given Rose the opportunity to reflect upon her life and the choices she made. When Rose looks in her jewelry case and opens her locket, she finds nothing. The emptiness of the locket reiterates the emptiness of Rose's life and the bleak relationship she has with her daughter. When she finds nothing in the locket to remind her of Catherine's childhood, Rose recalls painful images from the past that reveal the strain between herself and her daughter. As Rose remembers Catherine as a young, overweight child, it becomes apparent that Catherine, unlike her mother, was no beauty and did not live up to her mother's expectations. As Rose drifts into sleep, she envisions "a possible happy ending" where "the ring could save the furniture, Catherine could somehow forgive her, then she could forgive herself, and so on" (Brown, It Wasn't 14). In these final conscious thoughts, Brown directly addresses Rose's guilt. Unable to change the past, Rose never achieves her happy ending with Catherine, and as the story concludes, Rose is reminded not of her one sacrifice, but of the selfishness that drove her daughter away.

In contrast to Rose Merriweather, the mother, Edythe, in "Once in A Lifetime" [15] sacrifices her one opportunity for love in an effort to help her daughter. Although both stories explore the mother-daughter relationship, the two relationships and the mothers involved are quite different. While Rose has both money and status, Edythe has neither. Edythe is the antithesis to Rose: she is an endearing, selfless mother who repeatedly makes sacrifices for her daughter, Denise. Unlike Rose, Edythe is consumed and driven by her love for her daughter. Lacking fortune and social status, Edythe works for the well-being and security of her daughter, unlike Rose who is obsessed with her physical appearance and social status; Edythe is everything Rose is not. After fleeing an abusive and alcoholic husband, Edythe secures a comfortable life for herself and her daughter when she returns to her hometown and works as a waitress at a local restaurant. Motivated by her daughter's happiness, Edythe repeatedly affirms her love for her daughter through her continual hard work and sacrifice.

Because the story is revealed through a limited third-person narrator, Edythe's personality is conveyed not only through her actions but also through her personal, internal reflections. Edythe's caring nature is first revealed when the narrator describes the satisfaction Edythe gains through her job as a waitress: "Waiting on people, seeing them eat, seemed to make her happy" (Brown, It Wasn't 17). Edythe is depicted as a very kind, concerned woman whose quiet demeanor reflects the turmoil of her past.

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[15] First appearing in the anthology Many Voices, Many Rooms: A New Anthology of Alabama Writers, the story makes a second appearance in Brown's collection It Wasn't All Dancing. It is significant to note that the two stories, "Once in A Lifetime" and "It Wasn't all Dancing," appear back to back in Brown's collection It Wasn't All Dancing. Thus, the contrasts between the two characters are even more glaring as a person reading Brown's collection It Wasn't All Dancing moves directly from Rose's to Edythe's story.

Although she enjoyed attention as a child, when Edythe returns to her hometown, she tries to fade into the background as much as she can. Perhaps remembering her past or envisioning her future, everyday Edythe would "go up front alone and sit on a stool by the cash register, staring out the window as if lost in a daydream, oblivious to anyone who saw her and waved from outside" (Brown, It Wasn't 17). This image of Edythe staring outside the café window, daydreaming, suggests that Edythe's character has much to reflect on, whether it be the mistakes she made or her hopes for the future. When the narrator introduces Edythe's daughter, it becomes apparent that Edythe and Denise have a very close relationship and that Edythe is a protective yet nurturing parent. However, the story is set in the year 1950. While the role of a single parent is often difficult, the setting of the story during the 1950s makes Edythe's struggle even more demanding, especially when Edythe is forced to give up her life with her boyfriend Stanhope because of her daughter's pregnancy.

When Edythe sees Stanhope for the first time in the café, Edythe's inner commentary betrays her outward reactions as she immediately cautions herself from becoming too caught up with Stanhope or the possibility of something occurring between them. The character's name, Stanhope, symbolic because the word "hope" is embedded in it, suggests that he will be the answer to Edythe's hopes and is, perhaps, the answer to her daydreams. Although she never admits her interest in him, her avowal of her happiness with Denise demonstrates her acknowledgment of a possible attraction between herself and Stanhope: "He was from a different world, a world she knew nothing about. And now she had no interest in men from any world. Free of her husband, she

was satisfied with her job and her child. Her one goal was to give Denise what she thought of as a chance in life" (Brown, It Wasn't 19). Almost trying to convince herself, Edythe places herself on the defensive before anything happens with Stanhope. Thus, when Stanhope returns again to the diner for a second time, Edythe is both more cautious and more anxious. As she lies in bed that night, however, Edythe's thoughts are of Stanhope, yet her defensiveness turns to melancholy as she sighs and realizes that "Some girl would be lucky to get him" (Brown, It Wasn't 20). However, after Stanhope asks Edythe for a date on his third visit to the diner, Edythe is both shocked and scared when she begins thinking about the implications of a date and Denise's reaction to her news. When Denise responds excitedly to the news, Edythe gains the permission she needs to pursue a relationship with Stanhope. Towards the end of her date with Stanhope, Edythe tries to explain the structure of her life, but Brown never completes the dialogue. Instead, the narrator describes the scene, and Edythe's dialogue ends just before she has a chance to explain her situation to Stanhope: "I like you too, Stanhope [...] But I'm on my own now. I have to go straight..." (Brown, It Wasn't 23). The structure of this line represents the conflict that develops during Edythe's relationship with Stanhope. While it is probable that the abrupt stop indicates a kiss between the two, this interruption by Stanhope is also significant because it symbolizes the interruption that occurs in Edythe and Denise's life when Edythe and Stanhope begin seeing each other. Cautious and concerned, Edythe's thoughts are of her daughter and her obligations to her daughter's future; however, it is important to note the significance of the line and the symbolic silencing of Edythe just as she is about to request to return home to her daughter.

The idea of sacrifice is repeated as Edythe continually sacrifices her own felicity for the happiness of her daughter. As a single working mother, Edythe is forced to work long hours in order to provide herself and her daughter with food and shelter. However, when Denise is supposed to wear an evening dress for a school event, Edythe unflinchingly quells Denise's concerns regarding money by telling Denise that they will be able to save up enough money for a dress. While she resolutely responds to Denise's request, the limited third-person narrator reveals Edythe's inner concern with their financial predicament: "Except for Denise, Edythe felt alone in an unfolding mystery, sometimes kind, more often cruel. How much would an evening dress cost, and how would she pay for it? She couldn't go to sleep, but she didn't want to move and disturb Denise" (Brown, It Wasn't 20). Here, Edythe displays the selflessness of her character as she repeatedly makes sacrifices for the comfort and happiness of her daughter. Always placing Denise first, Edythe feels as if she betrays her daughter when she begins her relationship with Stanhope.

As Edythe's relationship with Stanhope progresses, Denise also begins to develop a social life, and as a result, Edythe and Denise begin to grow apart. When Denise becomes consumed by her social life, Edythe tries to put a stop to her frequent dating. Scared that Denise might make the same mistakes she did as a teenager, Edythe tells Denise, "What you need to do now is get through school, and try to be somebody" (Brown, It Wasn't 24). Edythe realizes that her relationship with Stanhope has removed her from home and has taken her attention away from Denise. When Edythe comes home early one evening from Stanhope's, she is distraught to find Denise gone from their

apartment and realizes that Denise has been deceiving her for months. Rather than burden him with her problem, she does not call Stanhope but instead waits for Denise's return. Conversely, Edythe's decision not to call Stanhope also demonstrates her feelings regarding his place in her relationship with Denise. While she and Denise are a family, Stanhope is still an outsider. This independence from Stanhope demonstrates Edythe's strength and sense of personal responsibility, something that becomes more apparent when she discovers Denise's pregnancy. However, when Denise arrives home and Edythe questions her about where she went, Denise responds with the same question, "Where have you been, Mama?" (Brown, It Wasn't 26). Blaming herself and her relationship with Stanhope for Denise's behavior, Edythe is unable to sleep, and the next day she confronts Stanhope and makes another sacrifice as she attempts to end their relationship: "I have to stop seeing you, Stanhope. I've got to get her straightened out, if I can" (Brown, It Wasn't 27). Just as before, however, Stanhope interrupts Edythe's plans when he offers to marry Edythe and subsequently wants to help Denise by making her "a nice home" (Brown, It Wasn't 27).

Excited and surprised by Stanhope's proposal, Edythe briefly experiences personal contentment as she, for once, achieves her own happiness. When she approaches Denise and reveals Stanhope's intentions, Edythe takes the blame for Denise's behavior and tells Denise, "It was my fault, for ever leaving you in the first place [...] But maybe it wasn't as bad as it looked. Mr. Rogers is going to marry me" (Brown, It Wasn't 28). Subdued in her reaction, Denise never accepts the blame for her actions but instead allows her mother to continue to carry the burden of guilt. Rather

than improve her relationship with Denise, Edythe's engagement to Stanhope appears to make the mother-daughter relationship more strained. Brown contrasts the lives of mother and daughter so that just as Edythe achieves happiness, Denise falls into a state of sadness. Denise tells her mother one evening, "You don't have to keep staying here with me, Mama. I'm not going anywhere. [...] I don't have any place to go" (Brown, It Wasn't 29). Denise's loneliness provides a stark contrast to the companionship Edythe has with Stanhope. Finally, the story reaches its climax when Edythe discovers that her daughter is pregnant and that her dreams for Denise and her future with Stanhope have all been destroyed.

When Edythe finds out that Denise is pregnant, Edythe immediately realizes the consequences of Denise's pregnancy. The gloomy setting of "grey skies and mists of rain" symbolizes the bleakness of Edythe's future as she chooses to give up her dream and her chance at love and personal happiness. As she holds Denise in her arms, Edythe "stared dry-eyed before her, the way she'd once seen a country neighbor stand and watch her house burn down, its glowing rafters collapsing at last into the heart of the flames" (Brown, It Wasn't 31). Again, for Denise's sake, Edythe remains strong and firm, never showing her concern or expressing anger. Like before, Edythe does not run to Stanhope for help but instead chooses to deal with Denise's situation on her own. Edythe calls off her marriage to Stanhope, unable to ask him to take up the burden of her family's problem: "That he would have gone through it with them if she'd let him, she had no doubt. That he would have lived to regret it, she was reasonably sure" (Brown, It Wasn't 32).

The title, "Once in a Lifetime" refers not only to Edythe's lost chance at love but also refers to the one time in her life when she puts herself first, for a brief moment. However, the final description of Edythe is not sad but instead stoic as Edythe represents a woman who has moved beyond the past: "Her expression, though, was different. Her gaze was no longer dreamy but thoughtful. In her eyes there were no regrets" (Brown, It Wasn't 33). Although Edythe repeatedly sacrifices her own happiness, she is able to give her daughter a good life; therefore, Edythe has no regrets concerning her decisions in life. Edythe's true happiness is in her role as a giver not as a receiver, and she is happy because, in the end, she did experience it all—love, happiness, and personal success.

While Brown's stories "It Wasn't All Dancing" and "Once in a Lifetime" look specifically at the role of the mother, "The House that Asa Built" [16] explores the dynamic between husband and wife and the idea of sacrifice as presented as a facet of family life and marriage. Similar to "Once in a Lifetime," "The House that Asa Built" is set during the 1950s; however, the setting is considerably different as the characters in the story live in a rural section of Alabama where the main mode of transportation is a horse-drawn wagon. The story focuses on the Oakes family and the conflict that arises between Pearl Oakes and her husband, Asa, when he returns home with a television set instead of a washing machine. As the conflict unfolds, Pearl, shocked and hurt after discovering Asa's spontaneous purchase, decides to leave Asa in an effort to convey to him her disappointment in his actions. For Pearl, the washing machine could have potentially made her life as a farm wife much easier as it would reduce both the time she spends and

[16] First published in 1955 in the Kansas City Review with the title "The Flesh, The Spirit, and Willie Mae," the story reappeared with significant changes in Brown's collection It Wasn't All Dancing with the title "The House that Asa built."

the physical strain she endures washing clothes by hand in a tub out back. While Asa tries to rationalize his purchase of a television set to Pearl, Pearl becomes distraught as she refuses to believe that the television is a reasonable sacrifice for her washing machine. Thus, Brown emphasizes the importance of sacrifice within the bonds of marriage when Pearl leaves Asa and discovers that love and companionship should never be sacrificed for one's personal pride.

When Pearl discovers that Asa has bought a television set, Pearl is dumbfounded by Asa's decision and believes that his actions are selfish and cruel, especially since the washing machine is a necessity and the television set is viewed as a luxury. As the story begins, however, the third-person limited narrator simultaneously reveals Pearl's anticipation while waiting for her new laundry machine and also her relief that finally Asa has agreed to purchase something useful. Providing glimpses into Pearl's past, the narrator discloses that Pearl had wanted a washing machine the previous year but Asa, instead, spent the couple's money on a set of encyclopedias. Because "Asa's lack of education was the regret of his life" (Brown, It Wasn't 102), he does not want his children to suffer as he did.

When the television set arrives at the Oakes' home, Asa explains to Pearl that he sacrificed the washing machine for the television because it will show their children the world: "The children will learn things they couldn't learn no other way. It'll be like another school for them here at home. For us too!" (Brown, It Wasn't 104). No matter how Asa tries to rationalize his purchase, Pearl is unable to see his actions as beneficial. When Asa tells Pearl, "You're not the only one, Pearl [...]. I need a tractor bad as you

need a washing machine" (Brown, It Wasn't 106), Pearl's first response is to leave as Asa's rationale only further frustrates her. The demands of the laundry cause Pearl physical strain, so when Asa buys the television, he is essentially relegating Pearl to another year of grueling work. But perhaps most importantly, when Asa decides, on his own, to purchase the television set, he, in effect, denies Pearl a voice in their marriage and in their family.

Pearl's happiness is duly represented by both her family and her personal belongings, but she wants the washing machine: "North Creek Life was hard in Alabama in the nineteen fifties, but Pearl Oakes was happy. She had Asa and the children, her own little house, a good stove, and refrigerator. The only thing she needed and lacked was a washing machine. Asa was to get that in town today, by means of the installment plan" (Brown, It Wasn't 101). This pairing of personal effects and familial connections shows the importance of both the material and the emotional when a family lives in a rural environment without many technological conveniences. While technology makes rural life easier, the family makes rural life bearable, yet, for Pearl, she is unable to see the importance of the family unit when she discovers the Asa has betrayed her trust and, in her eyes, gets in the way of her happiness. When Pearl watches Asa drive his wagon up to the home, the change within her is apparent as the narrator describes her reaction to his appearance: "for the first time she watched him with a cold heart. It reduced him to an ordinary man of medium build with thick dark hair. His face, which usually made her think of someone special, a teacher or even preacher, was the face of a plain dirt farmer" (Brown, It Wasn't 103). Pearl's reaction to Asa represents a break in their marriage and

the change that occurs is a result of Asa's lack of consideration. Because he does not consider Pearl when he purchases the television, Pearl does not consider Asa to be "someone special."

Just as Asa sacrifices Pearl's happiness when he decides to buy the television, Pearl, as a result of Asa's betrayal, sacrifices the future of her family when she leaves her home, demonstrating her need to regain some of the control she believes she has lost when Asa buys the television without her consent. In an effort to prove both her anger and her strength, Pearl takes herself and her children to her sister's house. As she walks to her sister's home, Pearl struggles with her decision to leave Asa but is fueled by her resentment for his brash behavior: "Now and then the strangeness of leaving Asa burst upon her in a flash of unreality. Has my mind gone bad?, she thought. What am I doing out here with my children? Then she remembered, and hurried on" (Brown, It Wasn't 107). As she admits her love for Asa, she also reveals her need to feel respected and her inability to sacrifice her personal pride. When she reaches her sister's house and sees her sister's washing machine on the porch, Pearl's feelings are vindicated: "A sense of justification unfurled within her, went up like a banner before her tired senses" (Brown, It Wasn't 107). As Pearl becomes driven by her emotions, it becomes evident that her feelings are a result of her anger and also her pain. Pearl's leaving is her attempt at inflicting upon Asa the same type of pain he inflicts upon her.

Pearl leaves Asa in order to express both her anger and the gravity of his mistake, yet when Pearl witnesses life from a different perspective, she unexpectedly receives a lesson regarding the significance of personal sacrifice. When Pearl arrives at her sister

Lutie's home, the narrator describes that "Lutie's house was luxury itself to Pearl" (Brown, It Wasn't 108). Although she does not have a television, Lutie's home is filled with modern-day comforts. Thus, Lutie's home and lifestyle become a point of contrast as Pearl experiences firsthand what life is like for Lutie. Unlike Asa, Lutie's husband, Buck, works long hours away from the home, enabling Buck to make more money so he can purchase nice things for his family. However, while Lutie has many of the modern-day conveniences Pearl does not have, Lutie does not have the loving environment that Pearl has at home with Asa. As she continually compares her life to Lutie's, Pearl slowly realizes the importance of what she has with Asa. Although Pearl tells Lutie that she plans on supporting herself and the children, Pearl's voiced intentions are betrayed by her internal remarks as she not only realizes the comfort she once had but also begins to lose her conviction when she admits that "the feeling of justification she'd brought up the hill was fading a little. Still, she couldn't get over what Asa had done" (Brown, It Wasn't 111). Thus, Pearl's experience at Lutie's home shows Pearl how precious her life is with Asa. Stuck in an abusive marriage and surrounded by several children, Lutie struggles with her children and her husband. Although Buck is able to provide for his family, the long hours he spends at work not only take him away from his home but also cause him to turn to alcohol as a release. When Pearl witnesses Buck's drunken tirade, Buck tells Pearl, "Ole Buck has a hard time, Pearl [...] All these mouths to feed. It's just work, work, ever day. Ever year another mouth to feed. What's the use? You tell me, what's the use? "(Brown, It Wasn't 112). With this revelation, it is evident that years of hard labor have taken their toil on Buck and have made him hard. After witnessing Buck's

alcoholic rage, Pearl realizes that although "she had questions of her own she couldn't answer," her life and happiness with Asa are not worth sacrificing and are worth more than her own personal pride.

While initially consumed by the need for a washing machine, Pearl's experiences with Lutie show Pearl that material things are inconsequential when compared to the happiness and contentment she has with her family and Asa. When Pearl returns to Asa, Asa attempts to make his own sacrifice for Pearl when he offers to work extra hours to earn the money for Pearl's washing machine. Pearl tells Asa, "I'd rather you wouldn't hire yourself out [...] You never did that before" (Brown, It Wasn't 114). Thus, Pearl surrenders her own comfort and convenience for the happiness and solidarity of her family.

As Brown explores the dynamic of the marital relationship, the conflict that ensues between Pearl and Asa is representative of many romantic relationships, as each partner struggles with the sacrifice of personal pride and sovereignty. However, the story emphasizes the importance of personal sacrifice on both sides of the relationship as Brown balances the arguments of both characters. While Asa's actions toward Pearl appear egotistical and disrespectful, Asa defends his position, demonstrating that his intentions are neither malicious nor unwarranted. In contrast, although Pearl's anger is warranted, her hasty decision to leave and refusal to talk to Asa make Pearl look prideful and rigid. Thus, Brown never places blame upon either individual but instead forces her readers to progress through the story and formulate their own opinions. Brown's story, however, focuses not on blame but rather on the idea of personal sacrifice. As Pearl

repeatedly tries to blame Asa, she is continually reminded of her life and her happiness with him. Therefore, although Pearl believes Asa has failed in his role as her husband, she soon realizes that one mistake in judgment is of little significance when taking into account the entire spectrum of their relationship together. In the end, Pearl realizes that her biggest mistake occurs when she overlooks the overall happiness she has at home and in her marriage to Asa.

Unlike Brown's other stories which discuss the value of sacrifice between loved ones, the story "Goodbye Cliff" [17] demonstrates the consequences of sacrifice as the story's main character suffers through years of personal sacrifice, only to discover that her years of suffering were the result of her husband's infidelity. Set in the rural South, the story captures the moments leading up to and after Miss Emma's discovery of her husband's infidelity when her neighbor, Miss Livey, gives her the news. Written in the third-person limited perspective, the story describes Miss Emma's life with her husband, Cliff, through a series of flashbacks. Limited to Miss Emma's viewpoint, the story slowly reveals the pain of Miss Emma's life and her difficult marriage to an abusive man. However, when Miss Emma gains full awareness of Cliff's unscrupulous behavior, she refuses to sacrifice any more of her time or her money on such an unworthy man and finds peace in the fact that she will never see Cliff in her version of heaven.

"Good-Bye, Cliff" documents Miss Emma's astonishment as she discovers that her dead husband is more reprehensible than she initially believed. Motivated not by devotion but rather by personal guilt, Emma plans to buy Cliff a tombstone because,

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[17] Originally appearing in the journal Prairie Schooner in 1980, the story is also part of Brown's collection Tongues of Flame.

"Cliff's grave had been on her conscience long enough" (Brown, Tongues 63). Emma acts out of obligation not out of love, and as the story progresses, Emma's disdain for her husband not only becomes more evident but also becomes more justified as Emma discovers that Cliff had an adulterous affair throughout their entire marriage.

Emma's life has been hard and the years of hard labor and financial burden have left a physical mark on her countenance: "Miss Emma was outwardly thin and frail, but her eyes might have belonged to a veteran of some long, major war" (Brown, Tongues 64). She is indeed the "veteran of some long major war" but not a conventional, military war; instead, Emma is the survivor of a hard life that involves years of physical labor and near poverty. As she procrastinates in choosing the tombstone, Emma's internal commentary reveals the truth about her life with Cliff: "Cliff had been hard, too hard, on his boys, whipping them like animals until they were big enough or strong enough to hold his arms so he couldn't" (Brown, Tongues 64). As a result of Cliff's brutal behavior and reprehensible conduct, none of Emma's boys agrees with her decision to buy Cliff a tombstone. Although her husband Cliff was abusive, lazy, and mean, Miss Emma believes that it is only proper to give him a tombstone. As she did when he was alive, Emma continues to stand by her husband, even though he was a miserable person and even though she realizes that he was more of a hindrance than a support. As she flips through the pages of the catalog, Emma sees a combination tombstone for both husband and wife. As she looks at the tombstone, Emma reveals her unselfish nature: "That would be cheaper in the long run and easy on the children. There would be nothing for them to do when she passed on except have a little marker put at her feet. But it made

her think of a double bed somehow and, frowning, she began to turn more quickly" (Brown, Tongues 67-68). When she is reminded of a "double bed," Emma's reaction demonstrates both her traditional views and her reluctance to spend eternity next to a man she never loved.

While the main conflict of the story focuses on Emma's decision to buy Cliff a tombstone, Brown also describes Emma's internal conflict as she reflects on her life with Cliff, on death, and on the afterlife. Aging and slowly nearing death herself, Miss Emma approaches death with anticipation rather than anxiety. Worn from years of physical labor, Emma's idea of heaven is not "a city of gold, garnished with jewels," rather "a kind of Sunday afternoon peace, in a place of shimmery light without walls or buildings, and without fatigue, loneliness, or worries over money" (Brown, Tongues 65-66). As she longs for a place "without fatigue" and "loneliness," Brown's readers learn that while Emma's life involved much physical labor, she also longed for the companionship of a loving, supportive husband, something she did not have in her husband, Cliff. While Miss Emma longs to see her deceased mother, father, and sister in heaven, she feels apprehension when she thinks of seeing Cliff again. Emma remembers that Cliff regularly attended church on Sundays, even though he spent the rest of the week drunk and passed out while his wife and sons completed the farm work. While he was less than pious during the week, as soon as he entered church, "he was like a different person" (Brown, Tongues 67). However, as Miss Emma soon discovers, much of Cliff's life was a façade, an act that allowed him to maintain a certain degree of respectability.

Throughout her marriage to Cliff, Emma is unaware that other people in the town are aware of his duplicitous nature. When Miss Livvy calls Cliff a "devil," Miss Emma is shocked and is curious about Miss Livvy's knowledge because "she had never talked about Cliff to anyone, not to a soul" (Brown, Tongues 69-70). As Emma tries to respond to Livvy's statement, Emma looks down on her hand and briefly remembers her wedding band: "She [Emma] examined her bare left hand. The wedding band had worn so thin it came apart, years ago. It was in an empty spool box in the top drawer of her dresser" (Brown, Tongues 70). This image of the worn wedding band symbolizes the strained and worn relationship Emma had with her husband Cliff. While the actual love between them had broken apart years ago, Emma still continues to recognize her obligation to her husband, an obligation born out of social propriety, not out of love. The image of the wedding band "worn so thin" represents the years of hard labor that Emma had to endure as a result of her husband's irresponsibility. Still maintaining her loyalty to Cliff, Emma explains her rationale by telling Livvy that she is only buying the tombstone because it is the right thing to do for Cliff since he was the father of her sons. Although she does not love Cliff, Emma believes that her role as his wife obligates her at least to buy him a tombstone.

As Livvy tries to persuade Emma against buying Cliff a tombstone, Emma becomes conscious of something else motivating Livvy to react so harshly against Cliff: "Miss Emma felt something coming, something she wished she could hold back or stop, but she didn't know how" (Brown, Tongues 70). As Livvy tells Emma of Cliff's infidelity, Emma's porch becomes silent except for "a sudden disturbance among the

birds" (Brown, Tongues 70-71), paralleling Emma's life as she receives the news of Cliff's unfaithfulness. Like the birds, Emma experiences a disturbance, a disturbance in her perception of her history and her life with Cliff. Although Emma initially tries to explain Livvy's claim as merely town gossip, Emma's internal comments reveal that she has previously heard of Cliff's disloyalty but not of his spending the family's money on his girlfriend. When Livvy tells Emma that Cliff's girlfriend "b*ragged* how much he spent on her," Emma "stiffened as from a blow" (Brown, Tongues 71). After Livvy leaves, Emma's memory begins to fill with long days of working on the farm with her sons while Cliff returns home from town with less money than expected. Suddenly, Cliff becomes even more deplorable and disgusting to Emma as she realizes that his deliberate actions forced her boys to live a life of poverty and that she has lived a life of self-sacrifice as a result of her husband's philandering. Emma's selfless nature is a striking contrast to Cliff's shocking deception. As she looks back upon her years with Cliff, Emma's initial anger focuses on the pain and embarrassment her sons endured as a result of their own father's fraud.

As certain puzzling scenes from her past suddenly make sense, Emma reaches the conclusion that "now she knew he'd been more than lazy, cruel, and a drunkard. He'd been a thief, who stole from his own wife and children. And not only a thief, but liar, adulterer, hypocrite..." (Brown, Tongues 74). However, as Emma broods over Cliff's unforgivable dealings, Emma suddenly finds comfort in knowing that Cliff, who was unable to repent for his sins, will therefore not be allowed into her version of heaven. As

she learns the truth, Miss Emma is subsequently released from her commitment as she no longer feels obligated to provide Cliff a tombstone.

Throughout his life, Cliff never provides for Emma or their sons, and as a result, Miss Emma now chooses to make Cliff go without. As Emma sits on her porch, she finally gains solace and peace in her life because she now knows that her troubles are over: "She didn't move but sat staring out upon the rosy horizon, overcome with awe before a new and frightening aspect of the universe. Even in the realm of right and wrong, where the eye couldn't see, all was in order, like the seasons, the tides, the stars in their courses" (Brown, Tongues 74). Here, in this passage, Emma's earlier wish for a heaven that incorporates a "Sunday afternoon peace" appears to have come true, but for Emma, she unexpectedly experiences her version of heaven while she is still on earth. Suddenly Emma's pain and anger subside as she questions if perhaps her experience with Cliff is "a passing sacrifice here on earth?" (Brown, Tongues 74). Miss Emma's vision of heaven is truly perfect: free of Cliff, she looks forward to "endless vistas of shimmering peace" because she knows that her sacrifices on earth have guaranteed her a place in heaven (Brown, Tongues 74).

While the stories "Once in a Lifetime," "It Wasn't All Dancing," "The House that Asa Built," and "Good-Bye, Cliff," discuss the self-sacrifice or selfishness of people in a family setting, the two characters in Brown's short story "Last of the Species" [18] confront issues of love and premarital sex and the mutual sacrifices required when two people commit to a romantic relationship. This story documents the afternoon meeting of two people who, previously in a relationship, choose to end their connection because the male

[18] "Last of the Species" was published in the May 1980 issue of U.S. Catholic.

character is unable to maintain the relationship without sexual intimacy. Although harder to follow than some of Brown's other stories, "Last of the Species" is an appropriate story for the journal U.S. Catholic since the story's main focus is on the girl's unwillingness to sacrifice her own morals and have premarital sex. Thus, as the title alludes, the woman in the story is the "last of the species" since she, unlike her successor Connie, will not have sex before marriage.

As the story begins, the unnamed woman arrives at her ex-boyfriend's apartment for lunch. Because the reason for their breakup is not mentioned until the story's conclusion, the story is somewhat clouded as the reader struggles to figure out the conflict and premise for the plot. Although neither the mannor woman is named, Brown does provide names of other characters, such as "Connie," "Phil," and the man's cat, "Lady." Connie and Phil are both somehow involved in relationships with the two main characters of the story: Phil is an admirer of the main woman, and Connie is the new girlfriend of the man. While the two main characters still share feelings for each other, the woman's continued preoccupation with and reference to "Connie" emphasizes that she is both jealous and aware of Connie's position and status as her ex's new girlfriend.

Subtle references contrast Connie to the main female character, who continually notices things around the male's apartment that she attributes to "The Connie influence" or existence (Brown, "Last" 20). In addition, as the woman pets the man's cat, the man notes the cat's behavior toward the woman since the cat "hates Connie" (Brown, "Last" 21). The woman relishes the cat's hatred of Connie, and her internal reflection reveals that "She felt somehow vindicated, redeemed by the cat. She was liked and accepted by

his pet, a creature of instincts who 'hated' Connie. This had to be significant" (Brown, "Last" 21). While lunch between the two characters continues, the manappears to want to get back together with the female, but she is reluctant. The two characters carry on a dialogue that is both vague and hard to grasp until the woman reveals more towards the story's conclusion.

After leaving the male's apartment and returning home, the woman flashes back to the cause for their breakup, and it becomes apparent that their relationship ended because she refused to have sex. As the woman returns to her mother and father's house, she remembers the breakup and reveals that she finally told her boyfriend, "I can't. I don't care what anybody else does. I can't stand that kind of living. I want to be like the wolves and coyotes and swans and pigeons, things that mate for life. I want something that will last. I want to wait until...I want to wait" (Brown, "Last" 21). Thus, although her reflections are again riddled with vague statements and peculiar references, it becomes apparent that the two characters have ended their relationship because he said he "couldn't" wait (Brown, "Last" 21). The female, unwilling to sacrifice her own beliefs, refuses to give into the man's requests. Therefore, after this detail becomes evident, the characters' previous discussions suddenly become clear as the existing sexual tension is finally given an impetus.

In the final scene of the story, the woman is seen running up to her father as he returns home from work. As the daughter greets her father and refers to him as "Daddy," the father "greeted her as he had since childhood, coming to meet her with open arms" (Brown, "Last" 22). While the love between father and daughter is different from the

love between boyfriend and girlfriend, Brown draws a parallel between the two relationships as Brown describes the family dog, jealous of the father-daughter embrace. As father and daughter hug, the dog tries to get in-between the two and suddenly the woman realizes that "the dog's jealousy had connected head-on with the cat's dislike of Connie" (Brown, "Last" 22). Thus, the girl realizes that the cat's hatred of Connie is a result of Connie's affection for and closeness to the man. As the woman realizes the significance of the cat's hatred of Connie, the narrator reveals the woman's internal reaction: "It was like a small collision inside her head. [...] She began to suspect she was seriously hurt and that it showed, even in the twilight" (Brown, "Last" 22). Deducing that her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend have had sex, the woman feels both hurt and alone. The final lines relate back to the title of the story as they subsequently provide a commentary on the progression of the general heterosexual relationship. As the woman looks up into the window of her house, she sees the outline of her parents and is reminded that their relationship is one of fleeting popularity: "Through the lighted window of their own kitchen, she could see her parents facing each other in conversation, framed as in a dated silhouette" (Brown,"Last" 22). The most significant word is "dated" as it suggests that the courtship rituals of years past are no longer an option for the future. Whereas the woman tries to maintain similar moral beliefs to her parents, she suddenly realizes that she represents a dying culture.

Another important aspect of this story involves the main character's dedication to her family. Scared that her parents might perhaps find out about her visit to her ex-boyfriend, she deliberately hides her visit from her parents and reminds her ex-boyfriend

to keep her visit a secret. This concern regarding her parents reveals that the woman is aware of her parents' opinions and is concerned about their feelings, yet her visit to his apartment demonstrates her continued interest in him and suggests that she continues to have feelings for him. However, her concern regarding her parents' opinions is revealed as she returns home to her parents' house and worries about lying to her mother. After unloading her car, the woman rushes into the bathroom because "She did not like to deceive her mother, did not expect to for long, since she was a very cool lady. She only wanted to postpone the confrontation until she knew what her own feelings were" (Brown,"Last" 21). The woman returns to her ex-boyfriend's house in an attempt to clarify her own feelings and because she is concerned that she made the wrong decision regarding their relationship. Up until this point, it becomes evident that the woman has been following her parents' advice and has lived her life according to their values. As the woman slowly discovers that her ex-boyfriend has a sexual relationship with his new girlfriend, she realizes that it will be hard to find someone in contemporary society to accept her choice to abstain from premarital sex. In the end, the woman is hurt by her ex-boyfriend's new relationship and realizes that while she maintained her beliefs, her opinions and values are no longer prevalent among many of her female peers.

While the woman tries to maintain her values and beliefs, she essentially ends up feeling hurt and alone, even though she gains personal pride as she refuses to sacrifice her own morals. However, while the story's conclusion shows her emotionally hurt, it is significant to note that her ex-boyfriend maintains that his current relationship with

Connie is different from his relationship with the main female character when he states, "What I have with her is nothing like what you and I had" (Brown, "Last" 21).

In the story's conclusion, it becomes evident that Brown's main objective in writing the story is to discuss the evolution of heterosexual dating and the changing values of contemporary culture. Written during the 1980's, this story documents that segment of history when women were becoming less inhibited by cultural stigmas and guidelines. While the main woman has her own beliefs regarding premarital sex, the title of the story suggests that she is a member of a dying group. It becomes evident that Brown, through the nameless, nondescript characters, is generalizing and commenting on the state of contemporary culture. The characters are nameless because their situation represents a common conflict as younger generations are forced to either abandon or accept the social mores established by their parents and previous generations. While many of Brown's short stories document the transition of the South from pre to post Civil Rights, this story attempts to document the transition from one generation to the next. A unique story in Brown's canon, "Last of the Species" focuses on the changing dynamic of the male/female relationship and the changing courtship rituals that most young people experience. While the man refuses to sacrifice his own sexual desires, the woman also refuses to sacrifice her beliefs.

The stories, "It Wasn't All Dancing," "Once in a Lifetime," "The House that Asa Built," "Good Bye Cliff," and "Last of the Species," contain strong messages about the importance of self-sacrifice. Through her third-person and third-person limited narration, Brown allows her readers to see how her main characters develop and how certain events

affect and shape their experiences. For the majority of Brown's characters, personal sacrifice is something that each character either chooses or rejects. As Brown's characters are forced to choose between their own happiness and the happiness of others, it becomes apparent that some excel in their socially prescribed roles. For the most part, Brown's stories suggest that those who make sacrifices for the benefit of others are ultimately rewarded. In most of the aforementioned stories, Brown's protagonists are often rewarded for their repeated sacrifices. For characters like Pearl Oates, Edythe, and Miss Emma, the reward for their sacrifices is intangible such as a sense of peace found in the family or the promise for a better future. In contrast, Brown's female protagonist in her story "Last of the Species" gains knowledge about human nature as she discovers that she is part of a growing minority. Each of Brown's five stories documents a different type of familial environment. From widowers to divorcees, Brown imparts to her readers that regardless of age or circumstance, those who make sacrifices will ultimately be rewarded.

CHAPTER IX

Because Brown's stories are predominantly realistic, the themes of death and bereavement appear in many of her stories as several of her elderly characters are forced to confront the inevitable progression of life. While stories like "The Cure" and "It Wasn't All Dancing" describe the emotions of elderly characters who are slowly progressing towards death, Brown's two stories "The Amaryllis" and "A New Life" focus on the process of bereavement for spouses who, after losing a loved one, are forced to reevaluate their lives and adjust to life without their partners. As the main characters in "The Amaryllis" and "A New Life" confront everyday life, loneliness and yearning drive them to explore different aspects of themselves and their environments. As Brown's protagonists move outside of their normal, everyday scope, they discover things about themselves and others as they are forced to view life from an unfamiliar perspective. Once part of a pair, Brown's surviving spouses are in a state of adaptation as they slowly learn more about themselves, the people around them, and also the loved ones they lost. Suddenly, Brown's protagonists are forced to deal with the limitations of human life as each character discovers both the beauty and the pain associated with mortality and gains insight as each one looks at an object, an experience, or a relationship in a new light.

In "The Amaryllis," [19] Brown explores the lonely existence of an elderly gentleman who discovers a new way of viewing life when he becomes enamored by the beauty of an amaryllis in bloom. "The Amaryllis" documents the loneliness Judge Manderville feels after the death of his wife, and the story is structured around the Judge's subsequent inability to fill the void left by her absence. The beauty of the amaryllis, however, becomes a type of companion for the Judge, something that motivates him to get up in the morning and puts him to sleep at night, but unexpectedly, the Judge's experience with the amaryllis forces him to reevaluate his understanding of life and the people around him. As people come to visit the Judge's blooming amaryllis, the Judge discovers that people not only enjoy the amaryllis, but they also enjoy his company too. The amaryllis, in essence, becomes the medium through which the Judge is forced to re-explore his existence and life without Margaret.

The opening line captures Judge Manderville's passion regarding the plant: "It came to be the first thing he thought of each morning. What did it do overnight?" (Brown, Tongues 93). Like the type of interest one shows in a new love affair, the Judge's enthusiasm only further demonstrates his loneliness and his craving for a companion. The attribution of humanlike qualities to the amaryllis also demonstrates the Judge's desire to fill the void created in his life after his wife died:

> The whole thing was so beautiful it had come to dominate the entire house. It was not only alive but dramatically alive. It had presence, almost like a person, and he

[19] "The Amaryllis" was first published in the July 1978 edition of McCall's and since its first publication, has undergone several changes. In addition to the publication in McCall's, the short story also appears in Brown's collection Tongues of Flame and in another short story collection entitled Songs of Experience.

> was conscious of it off and on all day. More and more, however, it seemed to be asking something of him, he wasn't sure what. (Brown, Tongues 93-94)

Rather than referring to the amaryllis by name, Brown uses the word "thing," forcing her readers to identify the amaryllis as something other than a plant. Thus, the amaryllis is more than simply a budding flower; it becomes an experience and the vehicle through which the Judge learns to appreciate and respect the beauty of life.

The amaryllis exudes a presence and creates a stir of emotions within the Judge. When the bloom opens, the Judge realizes that he should share the beauty with others: "He couldn't have something that special in the house and not share it. But with whom? The question had flawed every good thing that happened since Margaret died" (Brown, Tongues 94). Indeed, the Judge assumes that no one other than his deceased wife would appreciate the beauty of the plant: "Margaret would have loved the amaryllis, but all the other appreciators he could think of were either busy working, far away or dead" (Brown, Tongues 94). While the Judge longs to share the beauty of the amaryllis with his wife, the amaryllis also teaches the Judge to appreciate the magnificence found in seemingly insignificant objects. When the Judge discoverss some of Margaret's old notebooks, instead of throwing them away, he notes their worth: "Suddenly Margaret's wordbooks became intimate, as if they were journals, in a way. Someone else would have to throw them out, he decided, not he" (Brown, Tongues 106). Just as he found life and significance amid the blooms of the amaryllis, so too does the Judge find a remembrance of life among Margaret's books. The amaryllis has opened the Judge to a new way of approaching life. Although his life with Margaret is over, the Judge realizes that he is

just in another season of his life, and just like the amaryllis that reblooms, the Judge's life is now starting over.

In several of her short stories, Brown's elderly characters see themselves, or are seen by others, as nuisances or burdens on other family members. Largely, Brown's elderly characters have strained or distance relationships with their children and their children's spouses. Characters like Mr. Peterson in the "Parlor Tumblers," Miss Emma in "Good-bye, Cliff," and Mrs. Worthy in "New Dresses" either believe themselves to be burdens or are viewed as burdens by their immediate families. Likewise, Judge Manderville expresses similar sentiments when he decides to invite his son's family to view the amaryllis. Because his wife is deceased, the Judge turns to his son for companionship and hopes to find a captivated audience in his son and his family. However, like many of Brown's other characters, Judge Manderville feels separated from his son, a separation that becomes more evident to the Judge when his daughter-in-law declines the invitation to come see the amaryllis. Through the third-person limited narrator, Brown's readers are privy to the Judge's thoughts and feelings regarding his son and his family. Although the Judge is aware of his son's hectic schedule, he feels abandoned by his son, especially when it is revealed that "the Judge no longer thought of himself as immediate [family]" (Brown, Tongues 95). The Judge expresses even harsher sentiments regarding his daughter-in-law when he reveals that he is "something of an obligation, regularly and necessarily on the list but never quite convenient, certainly never a first choice" (Brown, Tongues 95-96). When the closest members of his family refuse to share this experience with him, the Judge feels alone and somewhat abandoned.

He has lost his wife and feels that he has also lost his son. However, as the Judge slowly gains an audience for the amaryllis, the absence of his son becomes less significant as people from the community come to see the flowering plant. Thus, the Judge's experience with the blooming amaryllis initiates him back into society as he is forced to step outside of his immediate family for support and companionship.

As a parade of people come through the Judge's home to admire the amaryllis, the Judge discovers that while he has lost his wife, he can find companionship and understanding in a variety of people. Thus, the amaryllis bridges the gap between black and white, upper and lower classes, young and old, and dead and living. First, when the Judge sees the reaction of Pot, his elderly black housekeeper who has worked for the Judge for years, the Judge is taken aback because Pot is a willing admirer who "looked at the flower with what it deserved, reverence" (Brown, Tongues 101). When the Judge sees Pot's admiration for the amaryllis, he asks himself "How could he have overlooked Pot as an appreciator?" (Brown, Tongues 101). However, the most obvious reason for the Judge's oversight is Pot's race. It is ironic that Pot, the family servant, is both the first admirer and the first person to share in the Judge's enthusiasm. Although the story reveals that the two men have been close throughout the years, this mutual appreciation and respect for the blooming amaryllis force the Judge to view Pot as a peer, not as a servant. Briefly, Pot steps outside his role as servant; yet as soon as he has paid his respects to the amaryllis, he returns to his position as housekeeper and servant: "Pot sighed. 'Well I got to get on to the house'" (Brown, Tongues 101). For a brief moment Pot and the Judge gain respite from their prescribed roles, and for that one moment, both

men stand before the amaryllis as equals. Like the Judge, Pot is also a widower who appears to be fighting off his own loneliness by retaining his position as housekeeper and servant. However, as "a surge of love for Pot rose up in the Judge's chest" (Brown, Tongues 101), it becomes apparent that the Judge slowly discovers that he is not alone and is, in fact, surrounded by caring individuals.

As the Judge entertains groups of people throughout the day, it becomes apparent that most of the visiting individuals do not come to see the amaryllis, but rather come to socialize with him. However, when the Judge shares the amaryllis with his postman Eddie, Brown creates a parallel between two men who are separated by class and education. When Eddie looks at the amaryllis, he comments, "That is the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my life, Judge Manderville. That is really something. I wish my wife could see it" (Brown, Tongues 105). Like the Judge, Eddie immediately wishes to share the amaryllis with his wife, but unlike the Judge, Eddie is able to share it with his wife because she is still living. Eddie's appreciation of the amaryllis coupled with his desire to share the experience with his wife connects these two seemingly opposite individuals. Although these two men are separated by age, class, and circumstance, there is a mutual respect and admiration between them. Therefore, just as Eddie admires the amaryllis, he also pays his respects to Judge Manderville when he tells the Judge's friend McGowan, "He's a real gentleman. A gentleman if I ever knew one" (Brown, Tongues 105). Thus, this experience with Eddie helps to reaffirm the Judge's worth as an individual. While Eddie enters the house as an admirer of the amaryllis, he leaves the house an admirer of Judge Manderville.

While the amaryllis establishes a link between the Judge and characters of different race and class, it also generates a bond between young and old as the Judge witnesses the awe and admiration a young girl experiences when she sees the amaryllis for the first time. The child, the daughter of a young lawyer, becomes enraptured by the plant as the adults around her talk about contemporary court issues. Uninterested in the discussion of his young lawyer friends, the Judge watches the young girl gaze at the amaryllis. The innocent, inquisitive nature of the child propels her to want to touch the flower. Like any young child, the girl wants to touch it and explore it through senses other than sight. When the Judge asks the young girl about the amaryllis, she tells him, "I love it" (Brown, Tongues 108). After allowing the child to both kiss and touch the amaryllis, the child becomes unruly as she demands to take the plant home. Uninhibited and unrestrained by age and social dictates, the young girl outwardly displays the intense desires—desires that are eventually quelled by social conditioning—felt by most people who become awestruck by something. The intensity of the young girl's reaction represents the same intensity the Judge experiences when viewing the amaryllis, yet his interest in the flower is more subdued and contained. Like the child, the Judge is enraptured by the flower's beauty, and like the child, the Judge's attachment to the flower gains intensity as he becomes more acquainted with it. Therefore, his connection to and love for the flower are just as extreme as the young girl's love, but the Judge, however, simply displays this passion through his concern, interest, and care of the plant. As both the old gentleman and young child share a powerful curiosity for the plant, the Judge is reminded that he is not alone.

Just as the amaryllis creates a connection between old and young, black and white, and upper and lower class, the amaryllis also represents the beauty shared between the Judge and his wife, and when the amaryllis blooms, the Judge eventually realizes that there is still beauty in the world, even after Margaret's death. The amaryllis teaches the Judge to appreciate the smaller, often overlooked things. Thus, through his experience with the amaryllis, the Judge learns to appreciate things about his wife that before went unnoticed. When the Judge discovers Margaret's notebooks, he notes that her habit of keeping a diary of unfamiliar words "was a habit like brushing her hair, to which he had paid no real attention" (Brown, Tongues 97). Yet, after a day of entertaining visitors, the Judge looks through the pages of her writing and finds more value to her efforts that he initially assumed. Although his wife never defined the phrase "ubi sunt," Judge Manderville searches and discovers that the word refers to "the transitory nature of life and beauty" (Brown, Tongues 106). Thus, just as he mourns the loss of his wife, the beauty of the amaryllis teaches him to appreciate what he has in the present. When Judge Manderville finds the words "Ubi Sunt" written in his wife's journal, Brown alludes to the life lesson Judge Manderville is about to learn. The evolution of life and the evolution of the amaryllis are analogous. As the Judge mourns the loss of his wife, the presence of the amaryllis suddenly comes into his life and forces the Judge to appreciate the beauty of both the past and the present.

After witnessing the amaryllis bloom and then die, the Judge discovers that his own life is in a new phase, and although he cherishes the memory of his wife, the Judge learns to accept the mutability of all living things and the evolution of life and beauty.

Through the amaryllis, the Judge gains a new perspective regarding life after loss. While at the beginning of the story the Judge longs for the companionship of his wife, in the story's conclusion, the Judge seems more accepting of change. As he watches the amaryllis change, it is revealed that "he [Judge Manderville] only knew that any change, or beginning of change, was already for the worse" (Brown, Tongues 110). However, while he recognizes the onset of change and initially assumes the worse, the Judge becomes more accepting of change when he realizes that the amaryllis will, in a year, eventually return to its past splendor when it will re-bloom and grow again. Finally, the Judge places the plant in the pantry in hopes of seeing it re-bloom in a year, conveying a sense of hope for the future. The promised beauty of the amaryllis represents the promised beauty of the Judge's future. While both the Judge and the amaryllis experience change, both plant and man have the opportunity to continue living, and like the amaryllis, the Judge continues to have many promising days ahead of him.

Like the Judge in Brown's story "The Amaryllis," the main character Elizabeth in "A New Life"[20] experiences the loss of a spouse, and like the Judge, Elizabeth struggles to rediscover life both at home and in the community as she learns to accept the loss of her husband. Elizabeth gains enlightenment through her experiences with the Vineyard people, a group of religious zealots who encourage her to join their congregation.

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[20] One of Brown's most published stories, "A New Life" has appeared in several journals and short story collections. First appearing in the journal The Atlantic in 1991, the story has been published in the short story collections New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 1992, The Christ-haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction in 1994, Downhome: An Anthology of Southern Women Writers in 1995, A New Life: Stories and Photographs from the Suburban South in 1997, God: Stories in 1998, and finally in her own collection of stories It Wasn't All Dancing in 2002. While the story underwent several small textual changes, the overall theme and structure of the story have remained consistent throughout the various publications. In addition, Brown has also signed permission to have the story adapted into a movie.

Similarly, both the Judge and Elizabeth appear to be emotionally numb after the loss of their spouses; however, just as the amaryllis causes the Judge to experience latent feelings of love, admiration, and hope, Elizabeth's experience with the Vineyard people becomes the impetus that allows her to face her emotions resulting from the death of her husband. Thus, Elizabeth's encounters with the Vineyard people force her to make choices regarding her life, and as the Vineyard people push Elizabeth to accept their faith, Elizabeth's emotions swell to the surface, allowing her finally to release her pent-up grief.

More than a year after her husband's death, Elizabeth is still trying to cope with her loss as she is unable to let go of her previous life and is unable to grieve properly over her husband's death. Thus, "A New Life" describes Elizabeth at that moment of change when she suddenly allows her emotions to surface, finally able to grieve for her loss. As the story opens, Elizabeth encounters an old boyfriend who questions Elizabeth's health and tries to assuage her grief by explaining to her that her husband is with God: "You're still grieving, when John is with God now. He's well again. Happy! Don't you know that?" (Brown, It Wasn't 35). Obviously, Elizabeth's old boyfriend Paul has become a deeply devoted Christian, and as the story develops, he and his wife attempt to help Elizabeth overcome the loss of her husband by introducing her to their religious group, the Keepers of the Vineyard. Written in the third-person limited perspective, Brown is able to provide details regarding setting and character history, in addition to providing insight into Elizabeth's feelings and emotions regarding her experiences. Thus, the story's religious theme becomes intertwined with the theme of death and bereavement as

Elizabeth's encounters with the Vineyard People force her to experience a series of intense emotions that eventually result in the release of her heartache.

The story takes place in the "the southern Bible Belt, where people talk about God the way they talk about the weather, about His will and His blessings, about why He lets things happen" (Brown, It Wasn't 35). Therefore, when Paul brings up God, Elizabeth is neither shocked nor offended. Living in a small town, Elizabeth is aware of Paul and his connection to the Vineyard People. In addition, the narrator divulges that throughout the town, many people are skeptical about the practices of the Vineyard People because those who attend the Vineyard practice an unconventional method of worship that involves direct encounters with God and speaking in tongues. When Paul and his wife visit Elizabeth at her house, Paul directly confronts Elizabeth's problem and then offers religion as the solution. When Paul remarks that Elizabeth cannot give up her dead husband, John, Elizabeth's internal remarks agree with Paul: "What can she say? He's right. She can't give John up and she is torn apart, after more than a year" (Brown, It Wasn't 37). Although Elizabeth explains to Paul and his wife Louise that she has lost her faith since watching her husband die, Paul persists and explains his own spiritual journey. Thus, Paul and Louise offer religion as a cure for Elizabeth's heartache, and in an attempt to persuade her to turn to God, Paul shares his own problems with Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears about Paul's hardships, she is shocked because she never knew of the pain he experienced throughout his life. Although Paul never mentions his relationship with Elizabeth, he begins his conversation with the comment: "We have the cure for broken hearts" (Brown, It Wasn't 37). While Elizabeth is hurting from the loss of her

husband, Elizabeth's internal reflections reveal that Paul experienced a lesser heartbreak when she refused his offer of marriage when they were younger. Thus, their past relationship allows Elizabeth to understand more about Paul's character and also provides the reader with insight into his personality.

Because Paul and Elizabeth share a history, several instances between the two characters suggest that Paul is, perhaps, still conscious of their shared past. After their first meeting outside the bank, Elizabeth remembers her refusal of Paul's marriage proposal and is forced to remember why she never accepted: "He'd simply made her nervous" (Brown, It Wasn't 36). While they were a couple, Elizabeth remembers Paul grieving for a favorite dog, but Elizabeth remembers that when she tried to console Paul, Paul pulled away from her advances: "the minute she'd touched him, ready to cry too, he'd stiffened. 'I'll have to get another one,' he said. And right away, he had" (Brown, It Wasn't 36). While Paul tries to comfort Elizabeth in her pain, he appears to be uncomfortable in his new role as Elizabeth notes that his "winks and jokes" are "coverup devices, she'd discovered years ago, for all he meant to hide" (Brown, It Wasn't 35). When Paul asks if he and his wife can visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth notices that he winks after he asks the question. Later, when Paul and Louise arrive at Elizabeth's house and the three adults hold hands as Paul blesses the pound cake, Elizabeth is struck by Paul's nervousness: "His hand is trembling and so warm it feels feverish. Because of her?, Elizabeth thinks. No. Everyone knows he's been happy with his wife" (Brown, It Wasn't 37). Paul's nervous behavior is the result of his new life clashing with his old life as he sits between his wife and his old girlfriend. However, just as Elizabeth previously turned

down Paul's offer of marriage, so too will she turn down his religion. The fate of their romantic relationship predicts the fate of their current friendship. While Paul made Elizabeth nervous when they were dating, in present circumstances he, his religion, and the Vineyard people continue to make her nervous, and her refusal of his friendship allows Elizabeth finally to enter into the grieving process. Just as her previous refusal of Paul opens up her future, so too does this second refusal. After all, her first refusal of Paul allows her to meet and marry her husband, John, and her second refusal of Paul again allows her to progress with her life as she becomes able to grieve over her loss and becomes capable of facing life without her husband.

Although Elizabeth never proclaims an interest in the Vineyard people, her own desperation to find deliverance appears to be her only motivation to visit their service. Before her visit to the Vineyard, Elizabeth consumes herself with the minute details of her everyday life. The narrator reveals: "Attention to detail has become compulsive with her. It is all that holds her together, she thinks" (Brown, It Wasn't 36). Rather than stopping or slowing down, Elizabeth continually occupies herself with something in an attempt to ignore the reality of her husband's death.

Unable to find her own solution to her pain, Elizabeth becomes both intrigued with and overwhelmed by the Vineyard People. After Paul and Louise visit her house, Elizabeth is visited by other people from the Vineyard. When two young girls, Beth and Cindy, come out to Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth reveals her inability to express emotions after Beth tries to comfort Elizabeth by sharing with Elizabeth her own experience with loss. Like Elizabeth, Beth explains that she too has lost a loved one, her boyfriend and

husband-to-be Billy. Moved by Beth's story, Elizabeth is unable to convey any serious emotions or compassion: "She [Elizabeth] feels a quick stir of sympathy but, like everything painful since John died, it freezes before it can surface. Now it all seems packed in her chest, as in the top of a refrigerator so full the door will hardly shut. She looks back at Beth with dry, guilty eyes" (Brown, It Wasn't 40). Because Elizabeth is unable to feel her own pain, she is also unwilling and perhaps unable to sympathize with anyone else's suffering. Thus, her latent emotions force her to feel "guilty" because she realizes that her own obstinacy will not allow her to empathize with anyone else's loss. As Elizabeth continues her conversation with the two girls, Brown's narrator describes the change of setting as Elizabeth rises from her seat to turn on a light: "The room is growing dark. Elizabeth gets up to turn on more lights, which cast a roseate glow on their faces, delicate hands, slender feet in sandals" (Brown, It Wasn't 40). This change in setting represents the change Elizabeth is about to experience and the change offered by the Vineyard People. The "roseate glow" that shines on the young girls as Elizabeth turns on the light symbolizes the optimism the Vineyard people wish to present to Elizabeth. The change in setting from dark to light also represents Elizabeth's eventual progression from depression to recovery as she eventually learns to accept the death of her husband. As the Vineyard People push their faith toward Elizabeth, Brown shows how Elizabeth reacts to their endeavors and how her reactions become the impetus for a change in her life.

From laughing to crying, Elizabeth's reactions to the Vineyard people slowly force her to step outside of her own controlled environment. Unlike her normal,

everyday life, the encounters with the Vineyard people are unexpected, uncontrolled, and unlike the details that Elizabeth so minutely manages, the determination of the Vineyard people is beyond her control. In her interactions with the Vineyard people, Elizabeth is forced to react as they slowly become more invasive and begin to interrupt her solace. After another sleepless night dreaming about her husband, Elizabeth is surprised to have an early morning visit from Louise. As Elizabeth sits at her kitchen table, the third person limited narrator reveals her distress as she uncovers her inability to release her emotions after her dream:

> She'd checked the space beside her with her hand to be sure, and her loss had seemed new again, more cruel than ever, made worse by time. If only she could cry, she'd thought, like other widows. Cry, everyone told her. Let the grief out! But she couldn't. It was frozen and locked up inside her, a mass that wouldn't move. (Brown, It Wasn't 41)

Grieving, to Elizabeth, would essentially confirm John's death, and Elizabeth is unable to accept that the love of her life is never returning. As she sits at her kitchen table, she reveals that "for twenty years she'd been, first of all, John's wife" (Brown, It Wasn't 41). Now, without John, she is forced to redefine herself and uncover a new identity. While Elizabeth contemplates her future without John, Louise makes an unexpected visit to Elizabeth's house and tells Elizabeth that she has had a visit from God in which God asked her to visit Elizabeth in order to remind Elizabeth of his love for her. As Elizabeth contemplates Louise's comments, Louise tells Elizabeth that a visit to the Vineyard could "save your life" (Brown, It Wasn't 42). Elizabeth, unable to find another solution to her

latent grief, decides to visit the Vineyard, perhaps out of curiosity and perhaps because she has no other alternatives. When she decides to visit the Vineyard, Elizabeth is unknowingly splintering her own hardened emotional exterior and opens herself up to experience emotions that she has previously quelled.

As she sits among the congregation at the Vineyard, Elizabeth observes her surroundings and becomes keenly aware of those around her. While she recognizes the charm and charisma of the pastor Steve, Elizabeth also notes that there are several widowers like herself among the parishioners. As all of the worshippers hold hands, Elizabeth begins to feel comfortable and supported as the narrator reveals that "without a hand to hold in her new single life, Elizabeth is glad to link in. She smiles at the young woman on her left and Paul on her right. Paul's hand no longer trembles but feels as it had in high school—not thrilling but dependable, a hand she could count on" (Brown, It Wasn't 43-44). However, Elizabeth's comfort is quickly dispelled as the group begins to have open prayers, something Elizabeth is neither familiar nor comfortable with. As the people go around and share their prayers and confessions, Elizabeth becomes more anxious and nervous. Unwilling to reveal her own prayers to the group, Elizabeth is shocked and somewhat amused by the emotions exuded by those around her. Instead of taking the revelations of those around her seriously, Elizabeth views the scene as more of a spectacle than a ceremony of devotion. As one boy with a speech impediment makes his testimony, Elizabeth mistakenly assumes that he is talking in tongues: "something nasal in his voice gives the clue, and she has a wild impulse to laugh. He's not speaking in tongues but is tongue-tied, from a cleft palate" (Brown, It Wasn't 44). However, when

it is Elizabeth's turn to speak, she is unable to utter a word. Subsequently, Louise offers up Elizabeth's soul for prayer, making Elizabeth's presence and her silence even more noticeable than before. Although Brown does not provide her readers with Elizabeth's reaction, it becomes evident that Elizabeth responds adversely to her experiences at the Vineyard. While Elizabeth does not agree with their methods and their dogma, her experience at the Vineyard and the persistence of the congregation force her to have intense emotions, and thus, her experience with the Vineyard people becomes the vehicle through which Elizabeth is finally able to begin grieving over her husband's death.

After visiting the Vineyard, Elizabeth, unaffected and uninterested, has no desire to promote any continued connection between herself and the Vineyard people. Elizabeth reveals that she is uncomfortable with their methods and believes that they are using her to demonstrate that "if she can smile in the face of loss, grief, and death, so can they" (Brown, It Wasn't 45). For Elizabeth, the salvation promised by the Vineyard people is neither helpful nor realistic. Instead, Elizabeth adopts her own dogma, revealing that her new motto is "one day at a time" (Brown, It Wasn't 46). However, when the people from the Vineyard continue to pursue Elizabeth, she avoids answering their phone calls and refuses to answer the door when they come to visit. While Elizabeth wants a break from their company, they continue to bother her. Thus, their persistence becomes more of nuisance than a show of concern. Although they are unrelenting in their pursuit of Elizabeth, Elizabeth at first becomes amused by their perseverance. As they persistently knock at her door, Elizabeth hides from them inside her house: "For the first time in her widowhood, she laughs when she's alone. It happens before she knows it, like a

hiccough or a sneeze. With re-found pleasure, she laughs again, more" (Brown, It Wasn't 46). Finally, since the death of her husband, Elizabeth, is able to experience an unfettered, uncontrolled release of emotion when she finds humor in the situation: "suddenly in her mind's eye, she can also see herself as from a distance, towel clutched like a fig leaf, hiding from a band of Christians out to save her soul!" (Brown, It Wasn't 46). While this is not the reaction the Vineyard people would have expected or appreciated, their pushiness forces Elizabeth to experience sensations that she would have otherwise quelled. When she finally answers the door, Elizabeth opens the door to find Beth and Cindy, along with the preacher Steve and two police officers. Instead of being angry, Elizabeth calmly explains to her pursuers that she does not wish to have company. While the persistence of the Vineyard people is extreme, she is unable to be angry and instead reacts with kindness: "Out of the blue, Elizabeth is suffused all at once with what seems pure benevolence. For a split-second, and for no reason, she is sure that everything is overall right in the world, no matter what. And not just for her but for everyone, including the dead! The air seems rarified, the light incandescent" (Brown, It Wasn't 47). At this moment in the story, Elizabeth changes: she is no longer angry but instead becomes hopeful and optimistic. After this discovery, Elizabeth allows herself to begin the process of healing as she suddenly discovers a peace within herself and with others.

Elizabeth completes her evolution as she allows herself to express her grief over her husband's death. While Elizabeth refuses to accept the teaching of the Vineyard people, their presence in her life forces her to express and experience emotions she has

previously been trying to subdue. When Paul and Louise make another visit to Elizabeth's home, Elizabeth is forced to stand up for herself when they question her refusal to see anyone from the Vineyard on the previous day. As Paul tries to find answer through prayer, Elizabeth again experiences a surge of emotion. While the day before she felt an overwhelming calm and peace, she now feels incensed and angry at Paul and Louise's overbearing persistence: " 'No, Paul. I can't!' She's out of breath as from running. 'This has got to stop! I can't be in your Vineyard. You'll have to find somebody else!'" (Brown, It Wasn't 48). As Paul and Louise leave Elizabeth, Elizabeth experiences an onslaught of grief. The tears that she was once unable to cry are suddenly rising to the surface as she is described sobbing into her hands. Finally, Elizabeth has come to a resolution regarding the death of her husband. Elizabeth's tears are not to be lamented but rather are to be embraced and seen as a positive symbol of her recovery: "One [tear] drop falls on the glass top where, in morning sunlight, it sparkles like a jewel" (Brown, It Wasn't 48). Brown's simile that compares Elizabeth's tear to a jewel reiterates the rarity and the importance of Elizabeth's grief. Now, as she releases her tears and her pain, Elizabeth reaches a turning point, and she can finally progress towards a new life on her own.

Both "The Amaryllis" and "A New Life" explore the physical and psychological disturbances that occur when a person loses a spouse. For Judge Manderville and Elizabeth, coping with the loss of a spouse becomes a day-to-day struggle as both characters strain to accept their existence without their loved ones. Both the Judge and Elizabeth try to find distractions that help them cope with their loss. Just as the amaryllis

becomes the Judge's vehicle for personal change, the experiences Elizabeth has with the Vineyard people become the impetus for her personal change and consciousness. As both the Judge and Elizabeth learn to cope with the loss of their spouses, both characters must find their place among society. However, as both characters are forced to accept their loss, each character learns to appreciate life as they are able to redefine their own existence and progress through life.

CHAPTER X

In an interview with Susan Ketchin, Brown comments on the application of truth and the idea of moral fiction: "Yes, I think there is moral fiction. It has nothing to do with didacticism, but with a writer's commitment to telling the truth—after first asking himself if it's truth worth telling" (321-322). Indeed, Brown's stories do not spend time moralizing or determining right from wrong. Instead, Brown allows her readers to take what they want from her writing as she forces them to formulate their own conclusions regarding the impact of change upon her characters.

Brown refuses to give her readers too much information regarding her characters' futures or long-term reactions. Because many of Brown's characters are amalgamations of both good and bad qualities, Brown makes her readers internalize and interpret the stories individually, through their own perspectives. Thus, Brown's characters are often ambiguous, floating in between good and bad as they, like most people, cannot be easily classified according to popular stereotypes. Therefore, Brown's stories and her characters move beyond simple classification. Refusing to create oversized representations of well-known stereotypes, Brown creates dynamic characters. J. E. Brown writes, "In her stories, stereotypes, negative or positive, reveal their other sides, lighter or darker, and hasty, judgmental attitudes toward people and places do not last" (x). As her characters are placed in different circumstances, different aspects of their personalities become more evident. Thus, Brown makes it uncomfortable for her readers

simply to pass judgment; instead, her characters test the boundaries of common stereotypes. As her stories rise above the common clichés and her characters display the often contradictory nature of humans, Brown forces her readers to formulate their own conclusions. While her prose style is simple, her stories are never basic as she constantly urges her readers to move beyond what is written on the page. None of Brown's stories ends with all the questions answered. Rather, Brown's stories ask for reflection and consideration from her readers. Many times Brown's readers are left hanging as her stories abruptly end after her characters come to some type of realization or discovery. Brown finishes her stories soon after the climax, forcing her readers to become active participants in her stories. Instead of forcing an opinion, Brown seems figuratively to ask her readers, "Now, what do you think?"

Through her simple narrative techniques, Brown is able to capture not just the complexities of a region but also the complexities of the human condition. Each of her stories is a portrait of a person, yet the portrait is changing—moving as all of her characters find themselves in the process of change or realization. As her characters progress through their everyday lives, Brown allows her readers to glimpse into the minds and motivations of a diverse group of characters. Ranging from an elderly black woman to a young, white school teacher, Brown's characters vary in age, class, race, and sex, yet Brown's chameleon-like ability to adapt and change perspectives is flawlessly executed throughout each story. Brown writes from several vastly different perspectives, yet each story is captivating as she continually proves her amazing ability to see the world through so many different eyes. Tempered with a simple, direct prose style that

makes frequent use of similes, Brown's writing is easy to follow yet rich with significance. Images and emotions are intertwined through Brown's usage of simile and implication as she provides just enough detail to allow her readers to create their own opinions. In an interview, Brown comments on symbolism in her writing and the role of the reader when she states:

> "I don't put all that [symbolism] in on purpose. A lot of it just comes from your subconscious as you learn about the character. When I write stories I see things I have written and wonder where that came from. The reader brings so much to a story. If it is real, it can have all those meanings." (qtd. in Caton 121)

Rather than telling her readers how to feel, Brown draws her readers into her stories by employing realistic, common imagery that is easy to comprehend. J. E. Brown refers to Brown's careful craftsmanship and attention to detail when he states, "Although her carefully crafted stories are more than a news report from the New South, they do reflect a skilled writer who knows how to make every word count, who never digresses or drifts into obscurity, and who has a great respect for a general public" (xiii). Therefore, Brown's economy with words and attention to detail pulls her readers into her work as she provides just enough information to make her readers involved participants.

Although Brown has received numerous awards and recognition for her work, she maintains a level of humility not often apparent in writers of her caliber. A very humble writer, Brown is quick to point out in interviews that she is perhaps one of her hardest critics: "I don't think anything I've ever written is very good, actually. It's just...it's just not great. I want to make it a work of art, something that will stand up. It's like a vase

that's right. It's something you can look at everyday and it will be pleasing" (qtd. in Caton 119). However, Brown's criticism of herself appears to be overly harsh as critics and reviewers have compared her to some of the greatest writers in southern literature. According to Peggy Brawley from People magazine, Brown has been compared to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Conner, and Eudora Welty, and like Faulkner, Brown uses her surrounding environment as an impetus for inspiration: "Marion is to Brown what Yoknapatawpha County was to Faulkner" (88). Like so many authors who have come before her, Brown's connection to the South is apparent throughout each story. In an online review for the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Hal Jacobs notes, "Brown is a gifted storyteller who sees the headline-sized issues and ironies of the region but is more interested in capturing the warmth of its small, heroic, personal struggles" (par. 5).

While most of her stories are set in the South and feature southern characters, Brown's stories speak about the human condition as her characters struggle to cope with their changing environments. In her article aptly titled "Truthteller," Susie Paul notes that while Brown's characters are shaped by their environment, their conflicts and their troubles are universally important: "Mary's stories are unerring in their truthtelling as they deal with lives circumscribed, perhaps, by place and circumstance but cosmic in significance" (2). Thus, while the South shapes Brown and her characters, her stories speak about the human condition and show how people adapt, change, and grow.

Yet, one cannot ignore the significance of the region since the South, a region filled with conflict, provides Brown with the backdrop to tell her stories. No reader can ignore the looming sense of place that is apparent in all of her stories. However, for a

reader to focus entirely on the setting would lessen the universality of her stories and her characters. Like so many authors, Brown writes about what she knows. Because her characters are multidimensional, she often gets calls from people claiming to know her characters, but according to Brown, "They are no one I really know. They are a little bit of everybody, here, there and yonder" (Brawley 86). As a writer, she uses the world around her for inspiration:

> I think what I do is create characters, then let them come to grips with my deepest concerns. Or maybe it's the other way around—concerns, then characters. It's mostly subconscious, like dreams, and a mystery. It's like a play, in a way, except that it's dead serious. My hope is simply to connect with the reader, but there's nothing specific that I want the reader to gain—except maybe another view of our common humanity. (Ketchin 321)

Thus, as a southerner, born and raised in the South, Brown writes about the world of her past and the world of her present. Her stories focus on issues that are typically southern as well as those issues that are more universal, yet no matter what the conflict entails, at the center of Brown's stories are characters who are caught in the middle of change. While most of her characters are distinctively southern, Brown's characters search to find peace in an often confusing, tumultuous world. For Brown, she wants her stories to evoke emotions within her readers: "I like books that break your heart. And when somebody tells me it made me cry, I think 'Good, I like to make people cry.' But laugh, too. I like to make people laugh and cry—do something!" ("Mary" Alabama Arts Council). Whether writing about the racial tensions between two individuals or the love

between a woman and her deceased husband, Brown gives her readers a glimpse into the lives of other people, and her stories capture the protagonists' struggles to identify, overcome, or accept the differences between themselves and other characters. Thus, Brown's readers become deeply involved in the process as they see and discover for themselves the importance of human life.

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