Jeffrey Eugenides' *Complainers* Through the Feminist Lens of Adrienne Rich's and Audre Lorde's Theories

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Complainers is one of the ten stories that make up Eugenides' most recent collection, Fresh Complaint, published in 2017. The story of two elderly women, who, crushed by the patriarchy and numerous glass ceilings defining their existence as wives and mothers, "elope" in a desperate attempt at self-definition and self-determination, *Complainers* is maybe Eugenides' most obviously feminist piece to date, except maybe The Virgin Suicides. The present paper sets out to trace feminist discourse in Eugenides' story by resorting to two core feminist texts, Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" and Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Through the lens of these two texts, we have attempted to prove that what Eugenides depicts in *Complainers* is essentially a non-sexual, but profoundly spiritual lesbian relationship.

Keywords: Jeffrey Eugenides, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, feminism, lesbianism, patriarchy, Fresh Complaint, female communion

Another layer of the lie is the frequently encountered implication that women turn to women out of hatred for men. Profound skepticism, caution, and righteous paranoia about men may indeed be part of any healthy woman's response to the woman-hatred embedded in male-dominated culture, to the forms assumed by "normal" male sexuality, and to the failure even of "sensitive" or "political" men to perceive or find these troubling. Yet woman-hatred is so embedded in culture, so "normal" does it seem, so profoundly is it neglected as a social phenomenon, that many women, even feminists and lesbians, fail to identify it until it takes, in their own lives, some permanently unmistakable and shattering form.

(Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence")

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obviously feminist piece to date, except maybe *The Virgin Suicides*. The story details the unconventional spiritual romance of Cathy and Della, who evolve from friends to confidents and finally to soulmates, who share a perfect communion of thought and feeling.

In her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Adrienne Rich claims that "women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise"[1]. And in her talk delivered at the New York University Institute for the Humanities, Audre Lorde boldly states that "for women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power I rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women."[2] It was with these two statements in mind that I started out reading and analyzing Eugenides' story "Complainers" as a piece that perfectly exemplifies the aforementioned theoretical statements. The complex relationship between Cathy and Della ticks all boxes of the classic lesbian relationship described by Rich and Lorde, except the sexual one. Theirs is a connection based on profound mutual understanding, acceptance, trust and companionship - the precise things which both women had been always missing in their relationships with men, be they husbands, lovers or sons. The two women "eloping" in the end of the story, as a result of their realization that no one can save them but themselves, and that they had spent their lives trying to please men who easily abandoned them the moment they no longer served their needs, recalls Rich's claim according to which heterosexuality as well as motherhood should be reconsidered and viewed as artificially imposed political institutions[3].

"Complainers" opens with the seventy-year-old Cathy visiting the eighty eight year old Della in a grim retirement home, which Della's sons, the pragmatic and rational Bennett and Robbie, have chosen for her. Della has been recently diagnosed with dementia is becoming dependent on outside help - that kind of help she has been offering to others (mainly the men in her family) all her life, and which is now being denied to her. We learn from the very beginning that Cathy has been reprimanded by her husband Clark for visiting her friend: Clark would have rather had her staying home and taking care of him. Thus, from the opening sentences the tone is set to a patriarchal world where women, wanting to nurture each other (in Lorde's terms) have to get male approval first, or at any rate, to worry about whether the men in their lives approve of their decisions or not. Cathy brings a book as a gift for Della, which they both love, and which acts as a leitmotif in the story: "Two Old Women", the story of two Inuit women left behind by their tribe in times of famine, who manage not only to survive but to thrive due to their communion, teamwork and profound spiritual connection. Just like the two Inuit women, Cathy and Della have been used, betrayed and abandoned by the men in their lives, after having served their needs for years. The only thing capable of spiritually saving them is their friendship, just like friendship assures the physical survival of the Inuit women in their favorite novel. Abandoning the patriarchal model and embracing a lesbian existence, not in a sexual sense, but as a complex spiritual and emotional connection and symbiosis between women, is the only path for salvation. In the words of Audre Lorde:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; .those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older -- know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (111)

From this point the story leaps back in time to the onset of Della's illness, and to her son Bennett's reaction to it. As compared to Cathy, who genuinely tries to be supportive of Della, to lift her spirits, to downplay the seriousness of the disease, and generally to act as a mental and emotional prop to her friend, Bennett just matter-of-factly evaluates the situation, as if he were signing a business deal: "It was left for Bennett to get on and tell her the medical details. These he delivered in a dry, matter-of-fact tone. Bennett works for an insurance company, in Hartford, calculating the probabilities of illness and death on a daily basis, and this was maybe the reason. " I was just out there last month and your mom seemed fine", Cathy said. "She just gets anxious, that's all." There was a pause before Bennett said, "Yeah, well. Anxiety's part of the whole deal." (*Fresh Complaint*, 6). |Women and their "complaints" are for Bennett, and men like him, "part of the whole deal", or rather ordeal, of having to deal with women. Women are commodities which serve their purpose for a while and are then discarded. His mother becomes a burden and a nuisance the moment she requires the same care Bennett, his father, and his brother Robbie required all their lives. Cathy observes their coldness and detachment with anger: "But it isn't their selfishness that bothers Cathy the most. It's how they stand before her now, infused - bloated - with rationality. They want to get this problem

solved quickly and decisively, with minimum effort." (26).

Yet another leap back in time occurs at this point, to the moment Cathy and Della initiated their forty-year friendships. They both worked at the College of Nursing (a highly symbolic choice of institution, considering the profound desire for nurturing, for caring, the two protagonists, as well as women generally, have), Cathy a thirty year old poor divorcee, Della a fifty year old old rich conservative. In the aftermath of her divorce, Cathy is taking multiple sexual partners, in a desperate attempt of what she calls making up for lost time - actually, trying to indirectly convince herself to never fall for men like her ex-husband again: "In addition to the sporadic pleasures she took from these men, , Cathy was seeking some kind of self-correction, as if the men's butting and thrusting might knock some sense into her (...)" (7). The violent description of the sexual act between Cathy and her lovers recalls Kathleen Gough's essay "The Origin of the Family", where the author lists eight key characteristics of male power, among which she lists the idealization of heterosexual romance and "pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation" (qtd. in Lorde, 639). Rather than realizing that heterosexuality is maybe not the option for her, Cathy insists on it, because she has been conditioned by the patriarchy to believe it is the only option open to her.[4] It is the same patriarchy that has taught her to view her own body critically ("After getting out, she stood before the bathroom mirror, appraising herself with the same objective eye she later brought to renovating houses. What could be fixed? What camouflaged? What did you have to live with and ignore?", 7), and to silently judge other women for their choices, appearance and preferences: "Della (...) drenched herself in perfume. It was some department store brand, floral and cloying, engineered to mask a woman's natural smell rather than accentuate it like the body oils Cathy dabbed on her pressure points." (7). Cathy indirectly accuses Della of trying to adapt her womanhood to societal standards - while she is doing exactly the same, sleeping with men who offer her no real satisfaction or fulfillment. A similar episode occurs later on in the story when Cathy takes Della to the hospital and silently envies the female doctor in charge of her friend:

> All this is related to them by a Dr. Mehta, a young woman of such absurd glamour that she might play a doctor in a medical drama on TV. Two strands of pearls twine around her fluted throat. Her gray knit dress falls loosely over a curvaceous figure. Her only defect is her spindly calves, but she camouflages these with a pair of daring diamond-patterned stockings, and gray high heels that match her dress exactly. Dr. Mehta represents something Cathy isn't quite prepared for, a younger generation of women surpassing her own not only in professional achievement but in the formerly retrograde department of self-beautification. Dr. Mehta has an engagement ring, too, with a sizeable diamond. Marrying some other doctor, probably, combining fat salaries." (24)

Dr. Mehta's description culminates in the diamond engagement ring she wears - another proof that for Cathy, and for most women raised in the patriarchal system, the highest form of achievement for a woman is not a career, not even physical beauty, but the approval of a man materialized in his intention of getting married.

In the beginning of her friendship with Della, Cathy, as most women will do, would rather fight against other women than against the invisible influence of the patriarchy. The two women start spending more and more time together, and Cathy discovers that Della actually shares many opinions on sex and marriage with her mother - but she also surprisingly realizes that she is more willing to listen to a stranger whose opinions she disagrees with than to someone who presumes ownership over her body (7). Apart from the silent judgment, Cathy also displays envy towards Della, preferring to meet her on neutral ground where she cannot be reminded of Della's financial superiority: "Cathy avoided going to Della's house, in Grosse Pointe. She didn't want to subject herself to the shag carpeting or pastel drapes, or run into Della's Republican husband. She never invited Della over to her parents' house, either. It was better if they met on neutral ground, where no one could remind them of their incongruity." (8). What is hinted at here is that patriarchy teaches women to fear, judge and envy other women, and to compete with them for societal, and especially male, acceptance.

However, after this initial period of silent judgment and occasional envy, the two women discover all the things they have in common: crafts, decoupage, basket weaving, antiquing (all connected to the act of creation) and, above all, reading. A moment of true connection occurs also during a party when Cathy convinces Della to smoke a joint. Della's first thought is, of course, of her husband Dick's reaction: "If Dick knew I was smoking marijuana, he'd hit the roof." (8), but she is thrilled about having a secret, a piece of her life she does not have to share with a (judgmental) man. Similarly, when Cathy has a falling out with her husband Clark, Della is there for her without questioning or judging, just genuinely offering her help and female companionship: "She just brought Cathy food every night for a week and listened to her rail until she got it out of her system. Enough, at least, to reconcile." (9). The reconciliation with Clark bears the same signs as Cathy's previous sporadic sexual encounters: it is not something she truly wants, but something she has been conditioned to believe is good

for her.[5] Cathy and Della stand for two key manners in which women can nurture each other: by offering silent, non-judgmental support (Della) or by trying to awaken the other woman, to make her aware of her oppression (Cathy).

The story's next episode returns to the grim present of Della's confinement in the retirement facility her sons have chosen for her (the last in a long row of choices taken from her during her life). Bennett had described the place as an assisted living facility - in fact it is a retirement community with minimal services. When questioned about why her sons did not choose a better place for her, Della prefers to blame Bennett's wife than her own son, who is directly responsible for the situation, and whose mother she is: "They probably could," Della says. "But they say they can't. Robbie's got alimony and child support. And as far as Bennett goes, that Joanne probably doesn't want him spending any money on me. She never liked me." (12). Yet again we witness an instance of women turning against women in order to protect men - the thought that in actual fact her own son, for whom she sacrificed so much, does not care about her, is too painful for Della, so she prefers to blame his wife. To gain and maintain men's favors women will turn against each other, and put each other in positions of inferiority.[6] In stark contrast to Della's sons, Cathy genuinely cares about Della's wellbeing. She considers her friend's dementia to be the result of a chronic lack of emotional wellbeing, of a chronic complaint, to paraphrase the title of Eugenides's story collection. Dementia is described in the story with the same language that might be employed to depict a violent sexual act - a predominantly male, patriarchal language: "Dementia isn't a nice word. It sounds violent, invasive, like having a demon scooping out pieces of your brain (...)" (10). In contrast to male indifference and the harshness of Della's illness stands the love, care, tenderness and communication between the two women. Cathy attempts to lift Della's spirits by redecorating her retirement home room: "We can start by brightening things up a little in here. (...) Make this place look like somewhere you live." "That would be good. If this place wasn't so pitiful-looking, I think I might feel better about being here. It's almost like being - incarcerated." (12). Spiritual nurturing, care and understanding, are what both women missed in their relationships with men. Only another woman can offer the solace, tenderness and genuine affection without which the female spirit withers and fades away.

The next episode takes the reader back to the past again, through Della's painful recollections of her childhood. She remembers how her mother, her brother and herself were living in a boardinghouse, and how her mother favored her brother over her, taking him to sleep up in a regular room, while Della was sent to a room in the cellar where "the door was made of metal, and there weren't any windows" (14). We witness yet another instance of patriarchal conditioning here: women are reared from childhood on to favor men, to cater to their needs and desires, even if this means sacrificing their own needs, their souls, or their womanhood, or another woman's needs, soul and womanhood.[7] Della's recollections testify to her buried life, from her childhood confinement to the cellar, to her adulthood confinement through marriage, and her confinement to a retirement home in old age. Out of all these the one that stands out the strongest is her claustrophobic marriage to Dick, who takes abrupt (and one might argue crazy) decisions without consulting his wife, spends all their retirement savings on absurd plans which all end in failure, forces her to move away with him ("So you're moving?" she said coldly. "I have to. He's making me.", 16), and finally leaves her to face bankruptcy alone. The patriarchal conditioning is obvious in Della's response to a situation when Dick suddenly gets out of bed in the middle of the night and backs his car down the drive - her first thought is not that her husband might have lost his mind, but that he is probably going to leave her: "I thought to myself, 'Well, maybe this is it. Maybe he's had enough and that's the last I'll see of him.'" (15). Women are raised to believe that if a relationship goes wrong, it must be their fault, and if a man is discontent and walks away, the woman has only herself to blame. This is also Della's reasoning. In spite of the fact that she has had to compromise much more than her husband in this marriage, that her "complaints" are far more complex and older than his, she still believes that Dick might have had enough of her and decided to leave. Della "was full of wonder and outrage at the ideas men latched on to, especially as they got older. They were like fits of insanity, except that the husbands experienced these derangements as bolts of insight." (15).[8]

A turning point in the two women's relationship occurs when Della decides to move away, pressured by her husband and his desire to start a business in California. Cathy, a feminist at heart, is enraged that her friend has submitted so easily to her husband's desires. She feels betrayed and abandoned, and the two have a falling out. However, on the day of Della's departure, Cathy appears at her friend's house and blurts out what is probably the essence of the entire story: "I'm just so *frustrated*!" (18). Both women have chronic complaints eating away at their souls, and these complaints are strikingly similar, even if the two are unaware of this. Their unhappiness and dissatisfaction are linked to men, to their failed relationships, to the difficulty of admitting that what they were taught all their lives they had to want and find happiness in, are nothing more than illusions. The climax of the story is reached when Cathy remembers how her husband Clark accuses her and Della of being lesbians because they spend too much time together,

and as a result Cathy forgets to make him dinner: "Once, early in her friendship with Della, Cathy forgot to leave dinner in the fridge for Clark to heat up. When she came home later that night, he got on her right away. "What is it with the two of you?" Clark said. "Christ. Like a couple of lezzies." (29). For the patriarchy, as Audre Lorde puts it, the only social role of women can be motherhood and the only existential role the one of catering to men's needs. If a woman refuses to serve and submit to a man, she must be insane or a lesbian - lesbian being in this context, of course, meant as an offense and an insult. The problem arises when women realize that the roles ascribed to them are not what they are advertised to be: "It wasn't that. Not an overflow of forbidden desire. Just a way of compensating for areas of life that produced less contentment than advertised. Marriage, certainly. Motherhood more often than they liked to admit." (29).[9] While women often sacrifice everything for the men in their lives (Della moves away with Dick, later she moves again to be close to her son Bennett), their efforts are rarely, if ever, reciprocated. Like the Inuit women in the book, who are left behind by the tribe the moment they are no longer useful, Della is left behind by all the men in her family. Cathy on the other hand is used by men for their sexual enjoyment, and once she is passed the age of sexual attraction, her husband ignores her completely and develops and obsession for the weather girls on television. While Cathy is starting a new business to make ends meet, "Clark retired and spent all day in front of the TV, entranced by pretty weather ladies on the news." (20). Cathy reflects on an issue she had previously ignored in Della's and her favorite book "Two Old Women": the two Inuit women were left behind not only because they were old; "it was also because they were complainers. Always moaning about their aches and pains. Husbands were often of the opinion that wives complained too much. (...) A way men had of shutting women up. (...) What was it about complaining that felt so good? You and your fellow sufferer emerging from a thorough session as if from a spa bath, refreshed and tingling?" (20-21). The irony is that men are allowed to complain about their wives' complaining, but women are not allowed to complain about anything, lest they be accused of nagging, mental illness or, as we have seen with Clark, lesbianism.

In the end of the story, Cathy decides to take Della out of the hospital without informing her sons and going to live with her and take care of her in Della's old home in Contoocook (as compared to their favorite novel, they are not left behind by the tribe anymore, they are the ones who leave the tribe behind). Even though they are caught in a blizzard and the house is snowed in, so they are consequently isolated from everybody else, they have never felt more connected to another human being. They both realize that they are each other's only real confidents and soulmates.[10] The story's ending is ambiguous - the reader cannot make sure if what is narrated really happens or is just a figment of Della's advanced dementia (she finds herself living alone in the house, with Bennett coming in on weekends, and a therapist and girl who does the cooking appearing occasionally). The last passage sees Della walking out into the sea of snow, trying to dissolve and disappear in it. Her unconscious desire to dissolve into nothingness symbolically stands for all women's invisibility within the patriarchal model, for the self-loathing they accumulate throughout their lives and which robs them of their personhood. In the end, facing her dissolution, all Della wishes for is a friend. Friendships equals understanding, mutual tolerance, acceptance and a feeling of safety, none of which can be achieved within the patriarchal heterosexual model. It is only genuine communion and companionship between women that can lead to true and lasting spiritual, mental and emotional fulfillment.

Notes:

1. "I am concerned here with two other matters as well: first, how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and second, the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship. Obviously there is a connection here. I believe that much feminist theory and criticism is stranded on this shoal." (632)
2. Online source:https://www.muhlenberg.edu/media/contentassets/pdf/campuslife/SDP%20Reading%20Lorde.pdf
3. I am suggesting that heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution--even,* or especially, by those individuals who feel they are, in their personal experience, the precursors of a new social relation between the sexes. (637)
4. Kathleen Cough, „The Origin of the Family," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* ed. Rayna Rapp Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 69-70. "(...) the idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising, etc.; child marriage; arranged marriage; prostitution; the harem; psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm; pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message being that sadistic heterosexuality is more "normal" than sensuality between women)". Adrienne Rich also talks about "(...) the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if

unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives" (640).

5. Rich addresses this complex aspect in the end of her essay, asking whether all heterosexual relationships should be condemned - the conclusion she reaches is that what truly needs condemnation is the lack of choice most women have regarding their sexual and spiritual orientation, due to patriarchal conditioning early on in life: "The question inevitably will arise: Are we then to condemn all heterosexual relationships, including those which are least oppressive? I believe this question, though often heartfelt, is the wrong question here. We have been stalled in a maze of false dichotomies which prevents our apprehending the institution as a whole: „good" versus „bad" marriages; „marriage for love" versus arranged marriage; „liberated" sex versus prostitution; heterosexual intercourse versus rape; Liebeschmerz versus humiliation and dependency. Within the institution exist, of course, qualitative differences of experience; but the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives." (659)
6. See also Susan Schecter's argument: "The push for heterosexual union at whatever cost is so intense that ...it has become a cultural force of its own that creates battering. The ideology of romantic love and its jealous possession of the partner as property provide the masquerade for what can become severe abuse" (*Aegis: Magazine on Ending Violence against Women* July-August 1971, pp. 5G51). Jealousy and wanting to take property of Bennett is what Della accuses Joanne of - in actual fact, she is guilty of the same rationale. In the end, there is only women hatred directed at each other, while the man is outside it, untouched by events and their emotional implications.
7. Consider Audre Lorde's similar rationale on putting male needs first: "Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educated men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns." (3)
8. What is considered insight in men, is looked upon as insanity in women, is what Eugenides is indirectly telling his readers here. Consider in this context also Phyllis Chesler's statement, according to which women are evaluated not in terms of mental health, but of mental illness: "Most of what we take for granted today was not even whispered about twenty years ago. For example, none of my teachers ever mentioned that women (or men) were oppressed or that people suffer when they are victimized - and then blamed for their own misery. None of my clinical supervisors even suggested that I review my own experience as a woman in order to understand women and mental health. In fact, no one ever taught me to administer a test for mental health - only for mental illness." (313)
9. In Rich's opinion, the prime reason for which women stay in abusive, or at the very least unsatisfactory, patriarchal contexts is compulsory heterosexuality: "Compulsory heterosexuality simplifies the task of the procurer and pimp in worldwide prostitution rings and „eros centers," while, in the privacy of the home, it leads the daughter to "accept" incest / rape by her father, the mother to deny that it is happening, the battered wife to stay on with an abusive husband. "Befriending or love" is a major tactic of the procurer (...) The ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool ready to the procurer's hand and one which he does not hesitate to use (.)... Early female indoctrination in "love" as an emotion may be largely a Western concept (...)". (645)
10. Most women actually share such relationships with other women, Rich notes: "I quote here from a letter I received the day I was writing this passage: „I have had very bad relationships with men-I am now in the midst of a very painful separation. I am trying to find my strength through women-without my friends, I could not survive." How many times a day do women speak words like these, or think them, or write them, and how often does the synapse reassert itself?" (646)

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