Dorothy Parker

The Woman Who Wouldn't Behave

Written by Andy Owen

There are people who pass through history, leaving neat footprints.

And then there are people who leave cigarette burns, empty glasses, laughter, bruised egos and comments so sharp, they still draw blood decades later.

Dorothy Parker belonged entirely to the second category.

She was a very special lady…

Dorothy Parker changed the atmosphere in rooms just by entering them – she was intelligent, sexually autonomous, politically engaged and totally uninterested in being liked.

She didn't seek approval, never softened her edges and didn't pretend. She was *real.*

Very few people like that, around these days.

And that is why, nearly sixty years after her death, she still feels modern - and still feels dangerous.

I have been meaning to tell her story for a while, but for various reasons, other articles pushed their way in front of her.

However, over the holiday, I made it a priority to start the year with Dorothy.

We don't get true characters like this anymore. More's the pity.

I smile when I think of her getting to grips with the woke wasters of today. She would chop them up into little pieces and flush them down the toilet.

Parker lived loudly, dangerously, hilariously and with a kind of reckless honesty that would make most of the tree-huggers break out in a cold sweat.

As I said, she was real. And some. She drank too much, loved too often, wrote brilliantly, failed publicly, succeeded spectacularly and never once pretended to be anything other than herself.

She did not cultivate a persona - she *was* the persona.

And sex? She adored it. Openly. Joyfully. Without apology.

By her own admission *"a plain disagreeable child with stringy hair and a yen to write poetry"*, Dorothy Rothschild was born in 1893 at her family's New Jersey summer home.

She was two months premature and would lose her Scots-American mother before her fifth birthday.

Then, soon after, she acquired a stepmother that she loathed.

Her Jewish father had been a successful garment manufacturer.

But, by his death in 1913, the business was failing, leaving Parker to support herself, first as a dancing school pianist and then in the brittle sophisticated world of New York magazine publishing.

She grew up as America was shedding Victorian restraint and embracing modernity.

By the time she found her voice, the country was ready for someone who could say the quiet stuff out loud - preferably with a martini in one hand and a perfectly timed insult in the other.

She was perfect for the role. Parker found refuge in words. Writing was not a calling for her in the romantic sense, it represented survival.

She joined *Vanity Fair* as a writer and theatre critic - and immediately demonstrated her most dangerous trait - she was both funny *and* right.

Like so many outwardly funny people, 'Dottie' Parker' was a woman of gloomy depths and she used her sharp tongue to keep people at a distance, even as she spun comedy from her misadventures.

She was also fond of self-dramatisation. As her friend Wyatt Cooper put it in a 1968 Esquire profile, tellingly titled 'Whatever You Think Dorothy Parker Was Like, She Wasn't', she had an "*affinity for distress*".

She was a petite, almost fragile figure, but her lethal wit marked her out from the start. Her break came when she sent a poem, *'Any Porch'*, to the charismatic editor of Vanity Fair, Frank Crowninshield.

He loved it. So much so, she quickly progressed from caption writer at Vogue, to staff writer at Vanity Fair, eventually becoming the magazine's drama critic.

As a critic, she was feared. Her reviews were too honest, too cutting, too precise.

Actors were scared to death of her. Producers loathed her. Readers adored her.

But in 1920, that same legendary wit got her fired, when she couldn't resist a wisecrack at the expense of actress Billie Burke, wife of one of the magazine's biggest advertisers.

That did nothing to slow her down. If anything, it sharpened her up even more. The 1920's were to be Parker's decade.

She published some 300 poems and free verses in various magazines - and in 1926, her first volume of poetry became a bestseller and garnered positive reviews, despite being dismissed as *'flapper verse'* by The New York Times.

At the same time, she was contributing short stories to The New Yorker, whose tone she helped shape from its launch in 1925.

And, of course, it was during those years that she became part of that ultimate in-crowd, the informal literary luncheon club that famously sprang up at the Algonquin Hotel - and became known as the Round Table.

Soon she was at the centre of the Algonquin Round Table - a loose, combustible gathering of writers, critics, actors and intellectuals who met daily for lunch at the hotel in New York.

They drank. They argued. They performed verbal duels for sport.

And Parker was the brightest blade.

She was always devastatingly quick. If someone said something foolish, she did not let it pass. If someone said something pompous, she dismantled it. And if someone underestimated her, they never made that mistake twice.

Her writing flourished in the pages of *The New Yorker*, where her poems, short stories and reviews became essential reading. She perfected a style that looked effortless, but wasn't.

She used deceptively simple language carrying strong emotional weight, with irony doing the heavy lifting of confession.

A Parker poem could be funny, cruel and heart-breaking all at once - often in under a page. Because of her style, she was professionally accepted - and moved comfortably among the giants.

She often clashed with figures who now dominate literary history. One such friend was Ernest Hemingway, a man whose public persona could not have been more different from hers.

Hemingway cultivated masculinity like a uniform. Parker skewered pretence wherever she found it. Yet, they respected each other, because each recognised the other as genuine.

Parker once famously quipped about Hemingway's writing that he used "*many short words,"* - a line that has been misread for decades as an insult when it was, in fact, a precise technical observation delivered in her usual tone.

She admired true talent. She despised fraud.

Dorothy Parker's *Constant Reader* column, which was Book Reviews in The New Yorker, sparked some of her most famous insults.

Here are just a few. They are simply majestic...

Mr. Beebe's 'Snoot If You Must':

"It is surely some dark, dark masochism that makes me say that title again. This is widely advertised for the Christmas trade. It must be what I believe is known as a gift book. That is to say, a book which you wouldn't take on any other terms."

Reviewing 'The Glass Key':

"The plot is so tired that even this reviewer, who in infancy was let drop by a nurse, with the result that she has ever since been mystified by amateur coin tricks, was able to guess the identity of the murderer."

Her Theatre reviews for The New Yorker, were equally cutting and surgical.

"Katharine Hepburn ran the gamut of emotion from A to B."

"The House Beautiful is, for me, the play lousy."

On Dame Edith Evans:

"Edith looks like something that would eat her young."

On Marion Davies:

"Miss Davies has two expressions - joy and indigestion."

"The only thing I didn't like about The Barrett's of Wimpole Street was the play."

Some of the funniest Dorothy Parker insults were delivered off-the-cuff.

Asked to use the word horticulture in a game of Give-Me-A-Sentence:

"You can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her think."

Told that Calvin Coolidge had died, she quipped:

"How can they tell?"

Clare Boothe Luce, meeting Parker at a doorway turned to her and said: *"Age before beauty*."

Dorothy Parker gliding in ahead, retorted*: "Pearls before swine."*

A party guest said to her: *"I simply can't bear fools."*

Dorothy Parker took a long pull of her drink and replied: *"Apparently your mother did not have the same difficulty."*

Don't you just *love* this woman?

Her comments were always colourful and cutting, especially when she came across hypocritical and sanctimonious people, as these quotes on couples and coupling show:

On the Yale prom:

"If all the girls attending were laid end to end, I wouldn't be at all surprised."

On John McClain, one of her lovers: *"His body went to his head."*

Referring to a party guest: *"That woman speaks eighteen languages and can't say "No" in any of them."*

"Scratch a lover and find a foe."

In a telegram to Mary Sherwood, following a well-publicised pregnancy:

"Dear Mary. We all knew you had it in you."

Dorothy Parker certainly liked a drink or two – and the insults to health or decorum always followed:

"Three be the things I shall never attain: Envy, contentment and sufficient champagne."

"A hangover is the wrath of grapes."

"One more drink and I'll be under the host."

Dorothy Parker insulted life, death and the rocky road from one to the other, with equal fervour.

Her frequent response to the bell announcing a caller:

"What fresh hell can this be?"

On a recent illness*: "The doctors were very brave about it."*

Any many others…

"The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity."

"Sometimes I think I'll give up trying - and just go completely Russian and sit on a stove and moan all day."

"People ought to be one of two things, young or dead."

These next Dorothy Parker insults suggest that she was not entirely enamoured of all aspects of the writer's life.

"Benchley and I had an office in the old Life magazine. It was so tiny, if it were an inch smaller it would have been adultery."

"If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second-greatest favour you can do them, is to present them with copies of The Elements of Style. The first-greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they're happy."

I can't write five words without changing seven."

Asked by an editor why an assignment wasn't finished:

"I was too fucking busy and vice versa."

"Salary is no object: I want only enough to keep body and soul apart."

If money is the root of all evil, this set of Dorothy Parker insults suggests she loved the sin but hated the sinner:

"If you want to know what God thinks about money, just look at the people He gives it to."

"I hate almost all rich people, but I think I'd be darling at it."

"Hollywood money isn't money. It's congealed snow, melts in your hand and there you are."

Identifying her favourite words in the English language:

"Cheque and enclosed."

Colourful as she was, her personal life, meanwhile, was a mess.

Beneath its tough satire, a current of intimate, unfulfilled longing coursed through her verse, whose rueful lessons were learned the hard way, through entanglements with a series of men.

"Take me or leave me; or, as is the usual order of things, both", she wrote.

Her first husband, Edwin Pond Parker II, a Wall Street stockbroker, whose name she kept, was an alcoholic and morphine addict. They wed in 1917 and divorced in 1928 but the marriage was over long before that.

Her second husband, Alan Campbell, was a writer 11 years her junior - and, if not faithless, then a terrible flirt. She learned that he was bisexual and subsequently proclaimed in public, that he was as *"queer as a billy goat".*

The pair moved to Hollywood and signed ten-week contracts with Paramount Pictures, with Campbell (also expected to act) earning $250 per week and Parker earning $1,000 per week.

Astonishing money in those days.

It was a very lucrative period for them both. They went on to earn up to $5,000 per week as freelancers for various studios

They were highly rated and enjoyed writing credits for over 15 films between 1934 and 1941.

With Campbell and Robert Carson, she wrote the script for the 1937 film 'A Star Is Born', for which they were nominated for an Academy Award for Best Writing Screenplay.

Parker then wrote additional dialogue for *'The Little Foxes'* in 1941 - and produced an uncredited 'dialogue polish' of *'It's a Wonderful Life'* in 1946.

A couple of Oscar nominations came their way, too.

Eventually their marriage ended in divorce, but they later remarried, bound together in a dance of push and pull that would continue until his death.

(Like her first husband, Campbell died from a drug overdose.)

She self-medicated *(she wasn't a writer with a drinking problem, she'd joke, but a drinker with a writing problem)* and chronically mismanaged her financial affairs.

Twice she attempted suicide - once following an abortion - and she became pregnant at 42 only to miscarry a few months later.

Behind the one-liners, was a woman who felt everything intensely.

Love, especially.

Parker fell in love the way some people fall down stairs - suddenly, painfully and with lasting bruises. She had numerous affairs, many of them with powerful, married, or emotionally unavailable men.

She wrote about love as something intoxicating and destructive in equal measure, because that's how she experienced it.

And she never pretended otherwise.

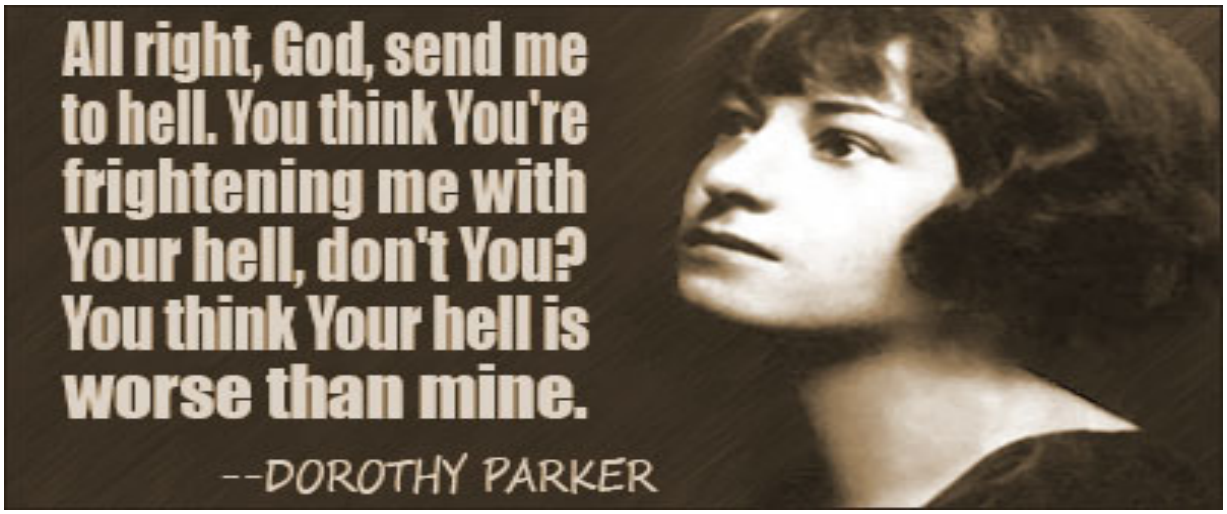
She spoke about sex the way she spoke about writing or drinking - as something she enjoyed and refused to be shamed for. Her quotes were frank, funny and deliberately provocative.

She knew *exactly* what she was doing…

In an era when women were expected to be discreet, grateful, and silent, Parker chose candour. That candour cost her.

She was often dismissed as "bitter" or "self-destructive," labels rarely applied to male contemporaries who drank just as hard and behaved far worse.

Her depression was real - and she struggled with it throughout her life.



But to reduce her to that, is to miss the point entirely. She was not tragic because she lived fully. She lived fully *despite* the cost.

Parker was politically engaged long before it was fashionable. She supported civil rights, spoke out against fascism - and was deeply involved in left-wing causes during the 1930's and 1940's.

This, though, had consequences. Hollywood blacklisted her. Work dried up. Friends disappeared.

She paid for her principles in very real ways.

Yet even then, she did not retreat into silence.

What makes her so compelling now is not just what she achieved, but how she lived. She refused the narrow definition of acceptable womanhood offered to her.

She drank when she wanted to. She slept with whom she wanted. She loved fiercely and foolishly. She failed publicly and tried again.

And she laughed. Constantly.

Her humour was not a mask; it was a weapon and a lifeline. It allowed her to talk about loneliness without sentimentality, about desire without shame, about despair without melodrama.

She made pain articulate - and that takes a rare talent.

Unfortunately, her work so embodied the era's giddy mix of cynicism and sentimentality, that once the Depression muffled the champagne corks and the clouds of war began gathering over Europe, Parker seemed dated.

In her final years, sadly living alone with her dog in a hotel room on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the most common response to anything she managed to write, was usually surprise that she was still alive.

(It hardly helped that much of her verse flirted so openly with the idea of doing away with herself.)

Few critics were as dismissive of Parker's talents as the author herself.

In middle age, she would disparage fellow Round Table writers, dimming her own achievement as their leading light by pointing out that none of their generation's greats attended – no Fitzgerald, no Hemingway.

If she was around today, how would she be viewed?

We celebrate "authenticity" endlessly, yet rarely tolerate it in practice. I suspect Parker would have been cancelled, dissected and misquoted within weeks.

The media would have done what they always do. They would have built her up and then chopped her down. Two stories, as always…

Her honesty would be labelled problematic. Her lovers would become headlines. Her jokes would be de-contextualised and weaponised.

But, she would not have cared at all. She would have loved the notoriety and fuelled the fire at every opportunity.

She probably would have made herself a lot of money with libel cases.

Dorothy Parker lived without a safety net. She did not smooth her edges, or apologise for them. She understood that life was brief, cruel, beautiful and absurd - and she chose to meet it head-on, cocktail first.

On June 7th, 1967, Parker finally left us. She died of a heart attack.

In her will, she left the bulk of her estate to Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr and the organisation, The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. (NAACP).

Even in death, she made a point.

"Excuse my dust": are the words that she suggested for her own epitaph. They made it onto the plaque that marked the spot where her ashes initially rested, in Baltimore.

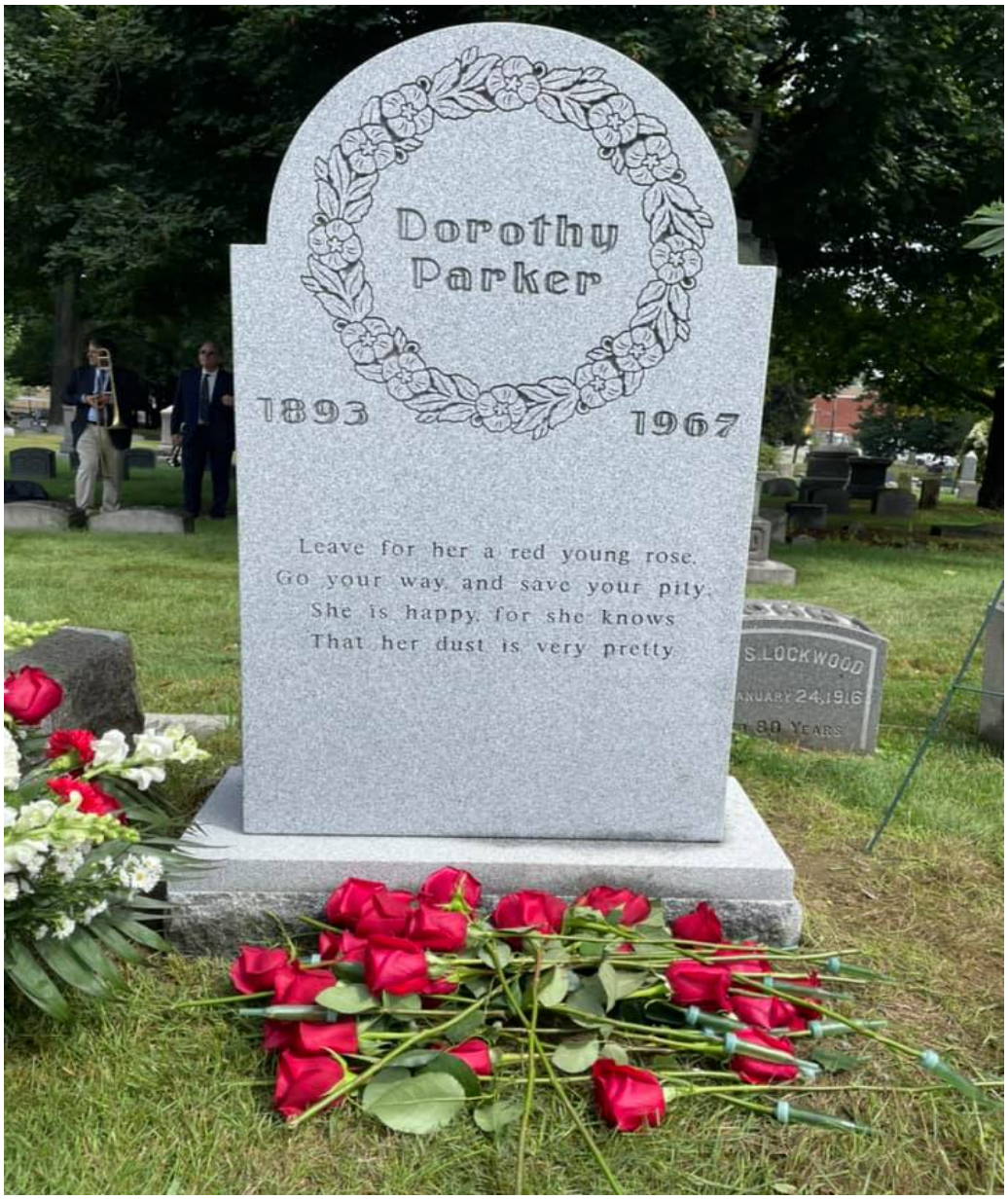
Following her cremation, Parker's ashes went unclaimed for several years.

Finally, in 1973, the crematorium tracked down her lawyer - and sent the ashes to his office. Unfortunately, he had retired - and the ashes remained in the filing cabinet of his colleague, Paul O'Dwyer, for another 17 years.

In 1988, O'Dwyer contacted celebrity columnist Liz Smith and after some discussion, the NAACP claimed Parker's remains and designed a memorial garden for them, outside its Baltimore headquarters.

In early 2020, the NAACP moved its headquarters to downtown Baltimore and Parker's relatives called for the ashes to be moved to the family's plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, in the Bronx, where a place had been reserved for Parker by her father.

On August 22, 2020, Parker was re-buried privately in Woodlawn.



We may think of her as a Round Table star, as a distiller of the tipsy, frostbitten sentiments that defined the Roaring `20s, as a New Yorker writer and a successful screenwriter and lyricist in Hollywood.

She was all these things and none of them.

As her friend Lillian Hellman put it in her eulogy: *"She was part of nothing and nobody except herself; it was this independence of mind and spirit that was her true distinction".*

I will paraphrase that: she just *'didn't give a fuck.'*

There has never been another Dorothy Parker and there likely never will be.

Not because talent like hers doesn't exist, but because the conditions that allowed such a woman to be fully herself, have narrowed rather than expanded.

She was a livewire.

She enjoyed life - every day, as fully as she could. And she was never ashamed to show it.

I would have loved to have met her.

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