

## **The neurotic gaze: Jules Feiffer seen through a feminist lens**

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The sixties have entered history with the idealized image of the last decade in which sweeping social change was possible. They have the halo of social reform, of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the new left movement, the Paris protests and the anti-capitalist revolt of youth and, finally, of the sexual revolution and the second wave of feminism.

The second wave of feminism went one step further than their forebears of the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While those women had fought and obtained the right to vote and to participate in politics, most of them had stopped short of analyzing and denouncing the structural and systematic institution of the patriarchy in its most quotidian and deep rooted aspects, in its pervasive discourse around femininity, the female body and the expected roles for women in society.

This had caused that many of the great conquests of the first wave of feminism, especially in the United States, could be reverted by a counter reform that had sociological, psychological and economic justifications (and consequences) and which strived to send women back to their homes during the forties and fifties. While the right to vote and the right to equal education could not and would not be modified, for they were too symbolic and hard won rights, the discourse for women that would develop during these years would be one of “normality” and quietism, a return, after the Second World War, to a domestic universe and to man as sole provider and worker: “*Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands.*” (Friedan, 1977, 14).

The critique to this state of affairs would give second wave feminism much of its impulse, anger and energy. This critique started in two very influential books that laid the groundwork for the mass social movement to follow: *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. In the first book, originally published in 1949, de Beauvoir employs psychology, existential philosophy, Marxism and a keen sociological eye to deconstruct the situation of women throughout their life and in every aspect of their relationship to society: the expectations put upon their

bodies, their minds and their spirits; the way society molds them to be only an object, never a subject; the way psychoanalytical discourse has been used to diminish and pathologize the underlying discontent that comes with the powerless place of femininity; the dualism that underlines society in which “*man represents both the positive and the neutral (...); whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity*” (de Beauvoir, 1956, 15). And thus birthing femininity as the Other, the oppressed: “*woman has always been man’s dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality*” (de Beauvoir, 1956, 19).

Friedan’s book, on the other hand, is much more practical and less philosophical, less concerned with matters of the self in the tradition of French existentialism and more interested in life of everyday suffering, boredom and lack of purpose that had been accepted as normal for the American housewife. Friedan employs sociology, history, discursive analysis and an interest in unpacking hidden meanings in everyday objects and texts to analyze the way American psychology, sociology, advertising and journalism have naturalized the role of housewife as the only possible role for American women and how the conquests of the first wave of feminism have withered before this onslaught and the passivity of American women. In a way, de Beauvoir is the theoretical framework, and Friedan’s is a pragmatic case study of a particular time and place.

These two hugely influential texts would shape the discussion around women rights and women’s liberation throughout the sixties and seventies. The movement, however, would soon expand and move further and farther away from the ideas of these two seminal authors as soon as larger waves of women would take arms against the patriarchy and develop their own versions of feminism. Some of them would emphasize liberation and separation from men instead of equality. This is what would be dubbed “radical feminism”, its expression found in a wide range of texts, manifestos and political actions, which go from the highly paranoid and extreme *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas, to the women’s liberation by way of revolution *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, to the academic deconstruction of the idea of sexual roles as natural in literature and society present in *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett. This evolution happened (mostly) throughout the second half of the sixties and first half of the seventies.

What does all this have to do with Jules Feiffer? Feiffer, who made his name as the satirical and political cartoonist responsible for “Feiffer” (the comic strip), which appeared in *The Village Voice* for 40 years (between 1956 and 1997) and chronicled the ever crazy, ever changing, ever unwinding American psyche and politics has always been interested, also, in the intricacies of the male-female relationship, its difficulties and disagreements: “*the hardest thing anybody does in life is live successfully with one other person. Harder than climbing mountains, harder than fighting a war*” (Groth, 1988, 88). This examination is carried out from a male perspective, of course, being himself a member of the masculine gender, but with an analytical and scathing perspective towards the neuroses and dissatisfactions, crushed dreams and bitterness, power plays and willful domination that run through both sexes.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we will juxtapose the works of Feiffer during these years with the writings and ideas of the second wave of feminism. We will trace this relationship in three moments: first we will analyze a set of “Bernard and Huey” strips, in which two characters (Bernard Mergentheiler, an alter ego of sorts of Feiffer, and Huey, a simpleminded and machist muscle bound giant) discuss and explore their relationships with women and the difficulties they both find in them. The majority of these strips were published between 1957 and 1964, before the intense social growth and awareness in second wave feminism. Secondly, we will analyze some strips that were published from 1967 to 1972, the moment of intense growth and popularization of the movement, which deal with it and its contradictions (at least in the eyes of Feiffer). Finally, we will discuss *Carnal Knowledge* the film, directed by Mike Nichols over a screenplay by Feiffer, which premiered in 1971 and is, in some aspects, Feiffer’s definitive statement over the “war of the sexes” and the male position in it.

### **1) Bernard and Huey in Dateland**

Bernard and Huey were the first and some of the only regular characters in the strip.<sup>2</sup> Bernard is a sort of Feiffer stand-in: skinny, nervous, shy, neurotic, he seems incapable of getting a girlfriend and then holding onto her. Women terrorize and are incomprehensible to him. He’s a spineless and egocentric mass of fears. Huey, on the other hand, is a muscle bound simpleton who has no time for women’s hopes, thoughts and minds. He’s just interested in their bodies and even then, just for a short amount of time. He’s egotistic, self-centered, a liar and sometimes violent.

Their interactions usually follow the usual routines in a two man set-up: Bernard as the straight man, forever crippled by doubt, having second thoughts about himself and his life and the way he treats women; and Huey as the no-nonsense punch-line, the man who gleefully (or at least absent-mindedly) exerts his masculine power over Bernard and over the women he seduces and then ignores or leaves.

One of their interactions, for example, shows them sitting at a café, Bernard clad in suit and tie, Huey sporting a polo shirt opened near his chest, showing some hair and a necklace. Bernard moans and moans “*Why do I always wind up with girls who are neurotic?*”, “*In the beginning we seem to be almost the same people. We love the same songs- the same movies*”, “*Then all of a sudden she begins to hide yawns while I’m talking*”. While Bernard soliloquizes and explains the habitual route his relationships tend to go down, Huey is more interested in picking up a girl sitting at a nearby booth: “*Smile you phoney little magazine chick. Smile!*” “*Go ahead! Pretend to read. Don’t pretend with me, sugar. Look up! Look at me*” “*Yeah, that’s my baby. Look at that no good little doll smile*”. In the last panel Bernard implores Huey, who’s getting up to go sit next to the girl: “*Do you ever respect girls, Huey?*” To which he answers “*If I had any respect for girls I’d never make out.*” (Feiffer, 1982, 33)<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 1. Bernard and Huey and their differing approaches concerning women.

It is, obviously, a strip conceptualized and told from a masculine point of view. And here we have two different types of masculinity and two different ways of looking at women. Bernard is a weak sort of man, someone who is always idolizing or expecting too much from women and whose expectations cannot mask his own insecurity. As

such, he's usually abandoned and sad, perpetually alone and at a disadvantage over women. Huey is the patriarchal man through and through. The one, as de Beauvoir puts it "*who conquers, who has the woman. It is not admitted that she, like a man, can have desires of her own: she is the prey of desire*" (de Beauvoir, 1956, 650). But, even though they have different characters, neither really connects with women, neither sees them as something other than an object through which to test their own neuroses and power.

Feiffer, speaking of these characters has said

Both are egoists, both are basically passive, both often let the girl make the first move. Their difference is that in Bernard's case they don't, in Huey's they always do – because Huey, unlike Bernard, knows his identity and uses it – uses it with an arrogance and a sensuality that is pure narcissism and which automatically attracts women to him" ("An impolite interview with Jules Feiffer", 1961, 13).

But what about women, you might ask? What role do they have in these micro-plays of masculinity? Contrary to what one would believe, they are mostly their own creatures, filled with the same dread, anxiety and insecurity as these male counterparts, especially in the strips which Bernard stars. In these, women concoct the longest and greatest explanations to justify leaving Bernard or to refute his poor judgement of their relationship. In one strip one woman tells him "*Can't you see Bernard? It's no good. You're a doll and I'm insane about you, but it really wouldn't jell, Bernard*" "*We're different! I'm a manic for parties – for fun people – for having a ball. And you dig television*" "*You're a dear Bernard. But I'm wrong for you. In time you'll realize*" (Feiffer, 1982, 19). In another one Bernard mansplains to a new conquest how wonderful she has turned out to be "*You look sensational, Dorothy*". Meanwhile Dorothy thinks "*I'm just good at making myself look sensational, he must be blind*". "*And you're fun to be with. I've never known anyone who was so much fun to be with*". Dorothy thinks: "*He practically doesn't know I'm around so I'm fun to be with. If he knew who the hell I truly was I wouldn't be such fun to be with*". All the while Feiffer draws Bernard in subtle variations of the same pose: holding her, caressing her, standing in awe over her in an attitude that is at the same time devotional and paternalistic. Dorothy looks up to him in disbelief and incredulity, with eyes open wide. This is reflected in the fourth and fifth panel, in which Bernard says "*You're the brightest girl I've ever known*" and she thinks "*If I were that bright he'd be afraid of me. The way he moves those hands around he's sure as hell not afraid of me*". In the fifth he continues

this enumeration and she thinks “If he doesn’t stop this inventory I swear I’ll scream” (Feiffer, 1982, 44). It doesn’t matter that Bernard is the “sensitive type” who “respects women feelings”, he still can’t see them for what they are, only for the idealized version that he has of them in his head. He can only see them as passive objects into which to project his own gaze.

Huey, on the other hand, is impassible and unchangeable. On one strip he’s drawn in what appears to be the aftermath of a night with a woman. He’s standing with his jacket draped over one shoulder and extends the following invitation: “Put on your shoes, I’ll walk you to the subway”. The woman then starts accusing him being crude, spoiled, and anxious to get rid of her. He just repeats the opening line panel after panel, ignoring every accusation. Finally, the woman’s indignation gives way to a sort of understanding, came across by working out the argument only by herself in her own head, in front of Huey’s indifference. Finally, she invites him out to have a few beers, his own logic of impassibility triumphant (Feiffer, 1982, 32).





*Fig. 2. Huey exerts his cool masculine power.*

Another, rather problematic, strip takes place after Huey has struck a woman. She's perplexed rather than scared or angry. She tells him she doesn't know how to react, that she's confused, that she has never been hit before. Meanwhile, Huey stands like a granite statue contemplating himself and uttering small phrases like "*I'm hip*" and "*Crazy*", but slowly worn down by the barrage of words, apparently expecting a more natural response. Finally she tells him "*Would you hit me again?*" to which he answers with a rather perplexed "*WHAT?*" and she retorts, as the punch-line, "*I'd like to take notes*" (Feiffer, 1982, 57). What's the point of this strip? To say that it rationalizes and justifies violence against women is going too far, but it does seem to think that neurosis and over analysis are the true evils that plague these characters, rather than social conditioning and sex inequality. Huey wants to impose an image of detachment and cause fear but he also finds his misguided masculinity upended by an unexpected reaction. He doesn't get what he wants, and neither does she, as she's involved in toxic and dependent behavior in order to understand it better intellectually. The strip, however, does seem to point out to a rather troubling relationship between intellectualism and the persistence of regressive gender attitudes.

The Bernard and Huey strips precede, for the most part, the dissemination and massive publication of the ideas and books of the second wave of feminism. They don't depict the obsessive and unhappy housewife of Friedan's account. They are very far away from the man-hating Solanas. They show, nevertheless, a creeping and structurally altering change in sex roles.<sup>4</sup> They posit that the great evil is neurosis and obsession, incomprehension, dissatisfaction. That the old ways embodied in Huey do not work no more but that the alternative, Bernard's dilettantism and frailty, are just as bad and paternalistic.

Several years later, though, and long after Bernard and Huey had moved on from being regular characters in the strip to give way to Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights protesters, liberals and their hypocrisies and different types of conservatives, the characters would make a brief cameo. Bernard being more or less still Bernard, skinny, briefcase in hand, a cog in the system that never questioned its place. Huey, however, was the living image of settling down: fat, contented, selling air conditioners, bald (Feiffer, 1982, 106). Huey had bought into the housewife trap, the family trap, in the

role of the husband-provider the half that confines women to “occupation: housewife” as Friedan would say, and to a life of “*sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love*” (Friedan, 1977, 37).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The sixties

In this section we will consider a variety of strips that have no fixed protagonist. In contrast to the Bernard and Huey strips, these are strips in which the characters represent different sections of American society, and which are closer to Feiffer’s stated idea to make a strip without recurring characters which criticized and satirized American society as a whole, through universal types and characters that stand-in for classes and sections of society. Or, in Umberto Eco’s words: “*catching with such precision the ills of a modern industrial society, [translating] them into exemplary types, and [displaying] in the revelation of these types so much humanity (nastiness and pity at the same time)*” (Eco, 1994, 39).

First of all there are many strips in this period<sup>6</sup> that deal with the isolation of married life in general, and of wives in particular. A sub-style of these strips have to do with the lack of communication between husband and wife, with the apparent dead end of marriage, the way it immediately turns people who should be in love into boring, jealous, controlling and distant people. In one of them, a couple goes out to dinner and they exchange amiable pleasantries of everyday life, telling each other small details of their day, their shopping plans, the telephone calls she missed while cleaning at home. They are happy, but their happiness is made out of a communication that is, in the end, another way of growing apart from one another (*Confirmado* #124, 1967, 7).

Another one boils down every argument, every fight, ever had by a couple to a simple formula. A woman and a man are having dinner together and she keeps talking, except every phrase she utters is in onomatopoeias: “*Frax*”, “*Derf*”, “*Verg*”, she exclaims. Until she says “*Ermp*”, something that terribly angers her husband, who retorts to banging on the table and exclaiming “*NORF NORF NORF NORF!*” Finally, the woman delivers the punch-line: “*We don’t agree on anything anymore*” (*Confirmado* #144, 1968, 33).

A third one shows a woman loudly complaining to her partner that “*there is an abyss between us that grows and grows*” and that “*Before, I knew your most intimate*



*thoughts*". Meanwhile, Feiffer draws the man with an impassible expression, dressed in a suit, hands in his pockets, and receding in the distance, getting further and further away, smaller with each passing panel. Finally, the woman demands to the man "*Tell me what I want to hear*" and he answers "*I love you. I've always loved you*". This calms her down, while he is a speck in the distance (*Confirmado* #102, 1967, 5).

Other important group of strips deals with the dissatisfaction and loneliness of the housewife. The most significant of these ones depicts a woman who oscillates between a depressed and bitter housewife whom Feiffer draws much older than she must be and a peppered up and exultant ditz who is the product of several different pharmaceuticals she consumes to have a good face and attitude in front of her husband. The punch-line comes when she runs out of chemicals and her husband asks her "*Who are you and what have you done with Dorothy?*" (*Confirmado* #168, 1967, 5) This strip embodies, in a microcosm, the struggle of housewives in the late fifties and sixties, the drudgery, the boredom, the recourse to alcohol or pills and, most important, the façade put on for husbands, who shouldn't be allowed to discover their wives true state. In the words of Friedan a "*smiling empty passivity*" (Friedan, 1977, 57).

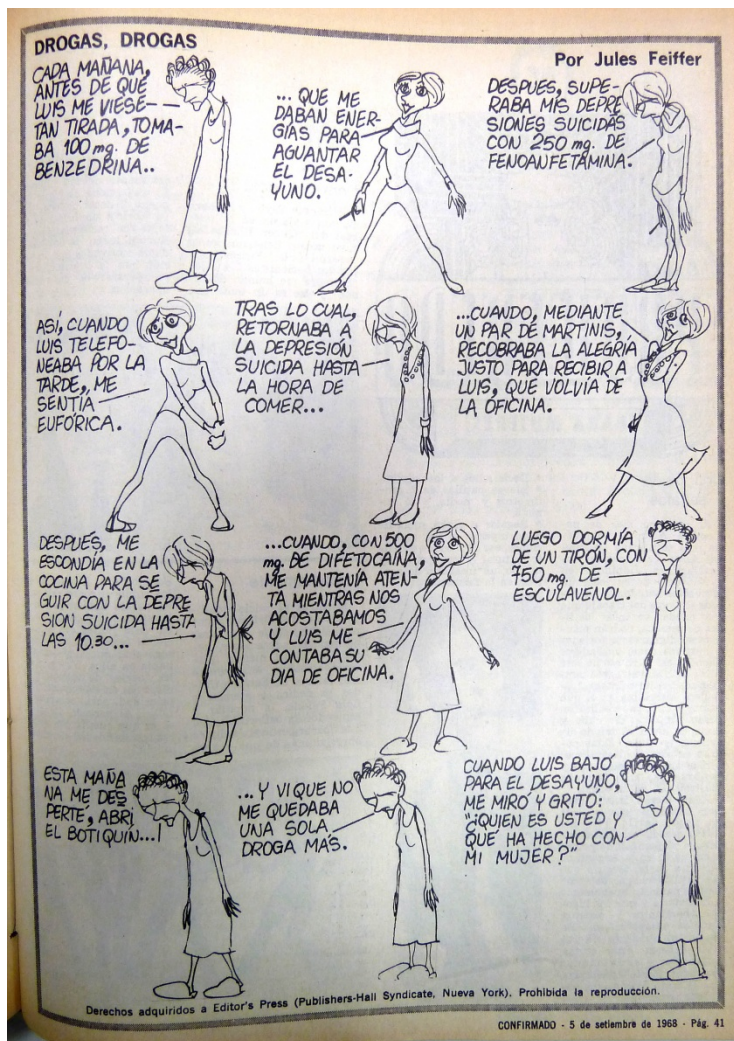


Fig. 3. Better living through chemistry for the American housewife.

Nevertheless, sometimes this kind of strips veers into a bit of micro-machism when Feiffer accuses women of being hysteric and incapable of being satisfied. One of them shows a woman who expounds upon the various endeavors and facets of her life: "I went to exotic places, searched interesting people", "Decided to face life seriously and got married", "Then I had a son", "Then I went back to teaching". In truly bovaresque fashion, each and every one of these moments in her life "didn't make me feel alive". Finally, she gives in, quits trying to be happy and alive and starts going to the movies, at which point she "truly feels alive!" Feiffer confirms this with a drawing that depicts her with a face of happiness bordering on idiocy and the attitude of a flapper of the twenties (Confirmado #162, 1968, 37). Feiffer seems to indict that character, to treat her as if the fault of her unhappiness lies on her unreasonable expectations, that can only be satisfied by fiction, by stories told in the cinema that have no relation to real life. But it could also be related to the concept of the independent

woman proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, the woman who “is torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life; it is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two; if she does, it is at the price of concessions and sacrifices which require her to be in a constant state of tension” (de Beauvoir, 1956, 656). So, the ultimate escape: fantasy.

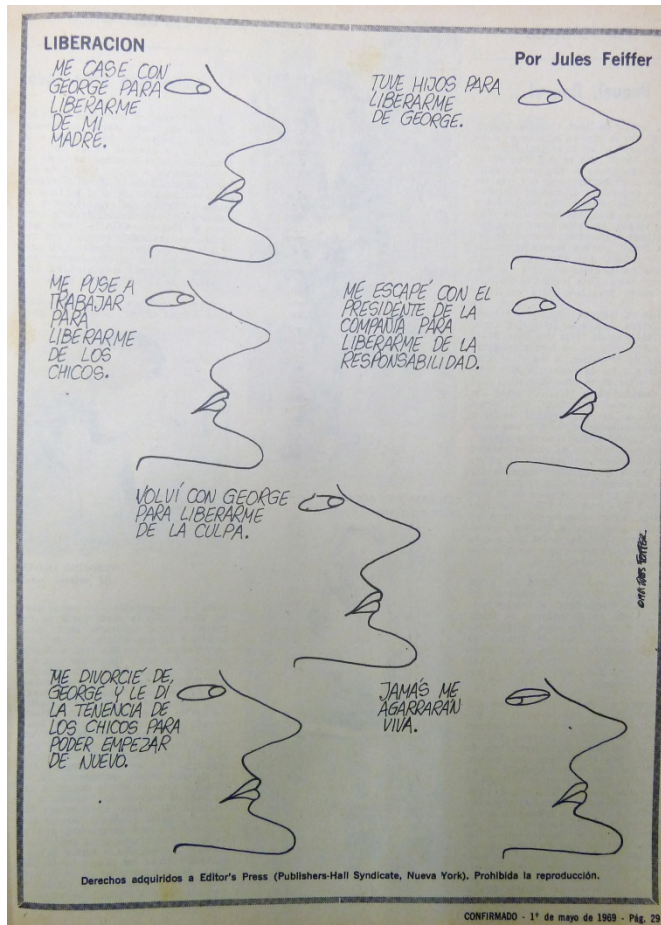


Fig. 4. Woman's liberation as perpetual flight.

Finally, there are the strips that deal with the Women's Liberation Movement in a direct fashion. Feiffer's position regarding woman's lib is an ambiguous one. On the one hand he seems perfectly fine with the idea in theory, but on the other one, perhaps spurred by the need to generate humor and give everyone his due, he seems a bit doubtful of the practices and the real effect of change of it.

In one of these strips, similar to the one described above, a woman, drawn by Feiffer in silhouette and profile, talks about the different things she did to “liberate herself”: “I married George to liberate myself from my mother”, “I had kids to liberate myself from George”, “I started working to liberate myself from the kids”. And so forth.

Until finally, in the last panel, she admits, like a seasoned criminal: “*They’ll never get me alive*” (*Confirmado* #202, 1969, 29). Once again it presents the woman as malcontent, taking on responsibilities to hide and escape some hidden and gnawing anguish. The difference with the previous strip is in the deliberate use of the word “liberation”, associated by this point with the social movement.

This sort of feeling is also recalled in a strip in which the man accuses the woman of being the one that wanted to get married, wanted kids, wanted that kind of cardboard cut-out life. But then, he tells her “*You tell me I’m your oppressor and you want to be liberated. O.K., you’re liberated. Can I go now?*” (*Confirmado* #285, 1970, 35). Once again here surfaces the common complaint: women are fickle and changing, women don’t know what they want, women drag men into marriage and then want to get out when the ideological winds change.

Another set of strips deal with what is perceived as the superficiality of intent and the difficulties truly changing things perceived to be found in the women’s liberation movement. A woman, drawn as a not-so-beautiful intellectual, muses that good looking women feel attracted to ugly men, but good looking men are only attracted to ugly women if they have money. In the end, she concludes: “*The problem with sex equality is that you have to be beautiful or wealthy for it to take effect*” (*Confirmado* #212, 1969, 45). Another one shows a woman sitting at different rows in a movie theatre<sup>7</sup>, perpetually moving while asking different men to save her seat. Finally, when she has one man per row keeping her a seat, she goes home. The last panel shows her smiling and exclaiming “*Power!*” (*Confirmado* #296, 1971, 37).

A third one depicts a hippie couple, drawn in fine line silhouettes distinguished by a tiara and a beard only. The man tells the woman: “*I’m not a male chauvinist pig*”, “*We’re both victims of the same oppressive system. We’re both equal partners in the same struggle*” and finally: “*But what I can’t understand is: after fighting all day to achieve those goals... Why do I have to come home to a dirty commune?*” (*Confirmado* #303, 1971, 33).

This trifecta of strips employ a common tactic of humor, the inversion of expectations with an ironic objective, to poke fun at what is perceived as a continuation of traditional gender roles even though the clarion of revolution had been sounded. Hippism represents the same old ways with a fresh coat of paint, women can’t exert

power except by tapping into men's old fashioned and out of date "gentleman spirit" and the old distinctions of beauty and money still exist.

But this is not the only point of view that Feiffer's strips take, and some of them are touchingly emphatic with the plight of women in a psychoanalytical and reflexive way, thinking about sex disparity in a sadder way. One of them consists of a woman, drawn once again in an almost unchanging silhouette in profile, with big glasses, long straight hair, a synecdoche of the young intellectual hippie woman with gender consciousness, who enumerates the different social institutions she cursed for her fate: herself, her mother, the educational system, the government, capitalism. Finally she realized that she ought to curse her husband but, sadly, "*He's only a symptom*" (*Confirmado* #245, 1970, 41). In this strip Feiffer deploys a circular logic to show the tiredness that can settle in when the entire system is against you and there's no clear party responsible for injustice. When the task in front seems so big and unconquerable, it's easy to fall onto catch-all blames and resentment only to find that they change nothing.

The second one was published in 1972 and perfectly captures the intersection between Feiffer's preoccupation with neurosis and hang-ups of a psychological nature and the alienation and isolation many women felt at the time. In it a woman, with a visible face of anguish and despair, talks about how she realizes that she was "*uncommunicated with herself*". So "*I tried to telephone. No answer*", "*I wrote. No answer*", "*I threw myself by surprise at myself. There was nobody home.*" So "*I left a message saying I would come back the next day. The next day the lock had been changed. Then I stopped worrying. I recognize when I'm not welcome*" (*Confirmado* #379, 1972, 59). As this monologue unfolds, Feiffer draws the woman further and further away. She starts as a portrait, a face occupying the entirety of the panel, and then she starts receding, growing smaller and smaller with each evidence of lack of communication with herself, becoming a figurine, until, in the last panel, she disappears.<sup>8</sup>

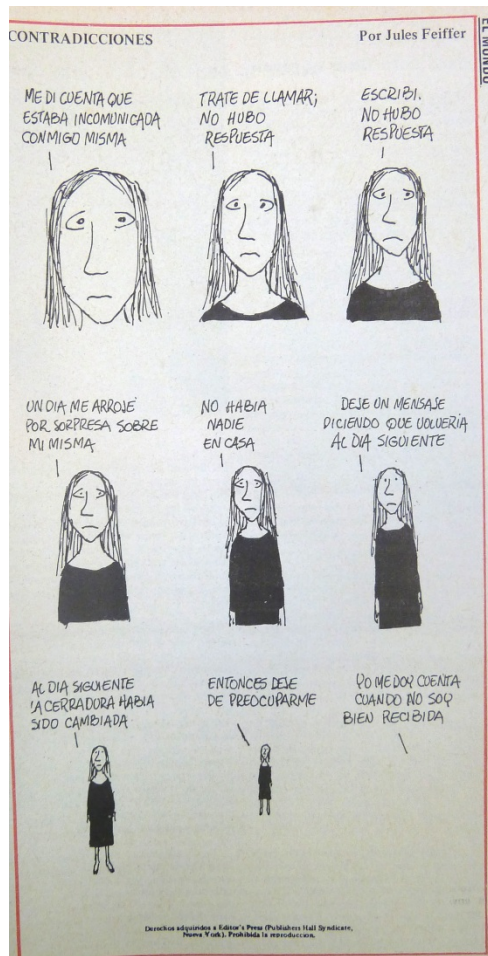


Fig. 5. Woman's crisis of identity seen through Feiffer's pen.

### 3. Carnal Knowledge

*Carnal Knowledge* is the second film Feiffer scripted<sup>9</sup>. It was directed by Mike Nichols and starred Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel. Premiered in 1971, the film attracted a certain degree of controversy for its depictions of sexual relationships with luxury of details (and a bit of nudity), its male characters that manipulated, lied and cheated women, and its cynicism concerning relationships.

The movie was even embroiled in a legal debate that went all the way up to the Supreme Court of Justice of the United States. In January of 1972 a movie theatre in Albany, Georgia, showed the film. On January 13 a group of police served a search warrant and seized the film. On March Mr. Jenkins, the theatre manager, was convicted of the crime of distributing obscene material. His conviction was upheld by the Supreme Court of Georgia which defined obscene material as that which had, applying vaguely defined community standards "a shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex or



*excretion, and utterly without redeeming social value"* (U.S. Supreme Court, *Jenkins v. Georgia*, 418 U.S. 153, 1974).

The Supreme Court, meanwhile, had defined new standards of obscenity in a recent case, *Miller v. California*, which stated that "*no one will be subject to prosecution for the sale or exposure of obscene materials [that do not] depict or describe patently offensive 'hard core' sexual conduct.'*" (U.S. Supreme Court, *Jenkins v. Georgia*, 418 U.S. 153, 1974). So, in the end, the Supreme Court of the US decided that "*Our own viewing of the film satisfies us that "Carnal Knowledge" could not be found under the Miller standards to depict sexual conduct in a patently offensive way*" and that even though "*there are scenes in which sexual conduct including 'ultimate sexual acts' is to be understood to be taking place, the camera does not focus on the bodies of the actors at such times.*" (U.S. Supreme Court, *Jenkins v. Georgia*, 418 U.S. 153, 1974) Thus overturning the conviction and declaring that the film was not obscene material. This sequence of events point towards the heated debate that was raging in American society concerning the sexual revolution, its depiction in the arts and its relationship with rapidly changing sex roles for both man and woman.

But what is it about? The movie follows two friends, Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) and Sandy (Art Garfunkel) in three periods of time. First, when they are college students and virgins. In the first scene they meet Susan (Candice Bergen) at a college mixer. "*I give her to you*" says Nicholson to Garfunkel. Sandy gets close to her but doesn't know how to talk to a girl and circles around her. Finally, she starts a conversation with him and they end up dating. But Nicholson envies his friend's girl and eventually pressures and seduces her into going out with him as well. Sandy unwittingly shares her with him for a while until Susan decides he's the best and safest option for getting married and leaves Jonathan.

The second sequence takes place several years after. Both men are now successful professionals, Jonathan a lawyer, Sandy a doctor. Jonathan is still a lecherous conqueror who hasn't found the perfect girl while Sandy seems bored by his own marriage. Jonathan finds a buxom beauty named Bobbie whom he likes more than every other girl. They start dating and she quickly proposes they live together. Then, Jonathan tells her to stop working "*because aren't you tired of it?*" consigning her to the home. But, as a liberated and modern man, he refuses to marry her, thus sowing the seeds of a



toxic and violent relationship in which he belittles her and she stays at home gripped by depression. Meanwhile, Sandy finds a new lover, Cindy (Cynthia O'Neal), whom Jonathan also likes, and everything comes to a head in an extended sequence in which Bobbie and Jonathan bicker and fight while they are waiting for Sandy and Cindy to go out. Finally, Jonathan proposes a couples' swap and Bobbie tries to kill herself by taking sleeping pills. The last scene of this sequence shows Jonathan, transfixed and filled with anger and anguish at his lover's attempt, screaming "*Very slick! Very clever! Well it's not going to work, Bobbie!*" turning very real drama into another excuse to bamboozle him into getting married.

The last sequence is the shortest one and is a depiction of the sad state of affairs of both friends, now well into their forties and alone again. Jonathan lives in a modernist and cold apartment and projects slides of his sexual conquests to his friends. Sandy has a moustache and is dating a 17 year old flower child. Jonathan, moreover, is impotent and can only get it up with a heavily doctored speech that she makes prostitutes recite and in which he is a "*real man, a kind man*" who "*inspires worship because he has no need for any woman because he has himself*".

The movie is told completely from the point of view of men. But they are sad, feeble, lonely, stupid creatures. They treat women like property ("*I give her to you*") and fail to see them as independent human beings. However, all that display of power and manliness is mostly directed toward one another, engaged in competition to prove which one is more virile, than towards happiness or a healthy sexual or romantic relationship. Like Bernard and Huey transported from ink and paper to celluloid and the flesh of actors, Jonathan and Sandy are basically egotistical and insecure, infantile and greedy. They are the best example of the kind of manipulative, shallow and dominant type of men whom the radical feminists of the second wave labelled "male chauvinist pig" or, in the words of Valerie Solanas: "*completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, of love, friendship, affection, or tenderness (...) a half dead, unresponsive lump*" (Solanas, 1967/1996, 1-2) eaten up with hate towards females and themselves for their inability to connect and to treat other people as human beings. Women, on the other hand, are destroyed by the games men play and at the same time are forever deluded by the expectations in marriage and stability instilled in them by society.

Feiffer himself said something of this nature regarding the protagonists of *Carnal Knowledge*:

It's the result of the society that the Jonathans were born into and the mythology they were reared up (...) They were trained to think about women as conveniences, receptacles, appendages and adjuncts, but never to think of them in the same terms in which they think of their buddies. ("Playboy Interview: Jules Feiffer", 1971, 84)<sup>10</sup>

He also said: "*You think boys grow out of not liking girls, but we don't grow out of it. We just grow horny*" ("Playboy Interview: Jules Feiffer", 1971, 84).

*Carnal Knowledge*, then, could be seen as the ultimate distillation of Feiffer's viewpoint concerning the war of the sexes: men lost and childish, women objectified and without agency; both unable to understand each other and to get out of the oppression of society. Feiffer's view is peppered with a great deal of black humor and satire, obviously, but that doesn't stop it from being a little bitter and plenty pessimistic. It's a vision that conceives relationships, and the entire man-woman duality, as a dialogue at cross purposes, an abyss that's impossible to bridge, mainly because they want different things, or, moreover, because both don't know what they want.

#### **4. Conclusions**

We have tracked the intersection between Feiffer and second wave feminism throughout his career in different media in the late fifties, the sixties and the beginnings of the seventies. As we have seen, his position regarding women's liberation is a bit ambivalent, especially concerning the most extreme and radical element of the movement. In one interview he highlighted this ambiguity when he said that: "*The women's lib movement, with all its nuttiness and perversity, is much more important than the sexual revolution, because what it will basically do over a period of years is make both men and women stop dealing with each other as objects*" ("The Playboy Interview: Jules Feiffer, 1971, 84).

Feiffer is more interested in relationships than in women's liberation per se, but he understands that relationships are so absurd and unfulfilling because the woman has been oppressed and diminished, because culture taught men to "dislike women" and made them grow into stunted children rather than men. Talking about *Carnal Knowledge* many years after the film premiered he said, about Candice Bergen's

character: “*She also gets dominated by one of the men, and that’s the history of sexual relationships, particularly up until the women’s movement. What men would do to bright women is cut them down so they could handle them*” (Groth, 1988, 61-62).<sup>11</sup>

Feiffer is and was an informed, compassionate and emphatic satirist and cartoonist and, as such, he didn’t skirt past the difficult topics raised by the second wave of feminism rather he tackled them head on. Feiffer himself has sometimes referred to some of his strips, with modesty, as “feminism before feminism”. Anyway, as a satirist and because of his own authorial voice and concerns, he couldn’t be completely sympathetic to the more radical voices in feminism, even though his male characters mostly behave themselves as “pigs”.

Feiffer in many interviews readily admits that he was “lousy” at being a bachelor, that he was nervous and insecure around women and that his own history of sexual and romantic conquest is more akin to a Bernard than to a Huey. His own emotional life, as narrated in *Backing into Forward*, his autobiography, is more concerned with relationships and stability than with the destruction of the family unit and the total and savage emancipation of women in a violent fashion.

But, nevertheless, he sensed that there was something deeply unsatisfactory with the whole way women and men treated each other and engaged in relationships: “*I think there’s a lot to be said that’s shallow and unrewarding in every aspect of our sexual lives, and it can’t be singled out*” (Groth, 1988, 91). But, ultimately, he believes that the right way out of this state of affairs is to relate to one another, to try and find a common space and a way out of oppression together. He’s an equality sort of feminist and not a liberation and separation one. Or, as he so eloquently put it once:

I think the most interesting story is how men and women get on with each other, the terms they accept to live together and survive together, the compromises they make, the betrayals of themselves and of each other, and how, despite the fact that over and over again they find that it can’t possibly work, it still seems to be preferable to anything else they know about. In the end, it becomes rather heroic. (“The Playboy Interview: Jules Feiffer”, 1971, 96).

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<sup>1</sup> We won’t dwell on the particulars of Feiffer’s career and place inside American comic books. Safe to say, our perspective takes him as a prism through one can read a great deal of the history of American

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comics, from the newspapers through the Golden Age of comic books, the underground movement of the sixties, the rise of the graphic novel and beyond. A more detailed account of his career can be found in Gandolfo, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Feiffer said that “*The original concept of the strip was to have no set characters. I like the fact that they slowly and undeliberately evolved*” (“An impolite interview with Jules Feiffer”, 1961, 13).

<sup>3</sup> In this section we will be using the massive anthology *Jules Feiffer’s America. From Eisenhower to Reagan* which, sadly, does not list the original date of publication of singular strips. Rather, it is organized by presidential administration. The strips we’ll employ here come from the sections dedicated to Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, so they were published between 1956 and 1964.

<sup>4</sup> We will refrain from employing “gender” in a widespread way since the concept was not yet a main part of feminist discourse in this period, and, moreover, because Feiffer’s strips most often than not deal with traditional gender roles and a masculine-feminine opposition.

<sup>5</sup> Several years later, during the eighties, Feiffer would revive Bernard and Huey as a strip for *Playboy*. Both men, middle aged, bloated and lonely, would continue to philosophize about women and relationships in a much more brutal and sad depiction.

<sup>6</sup> The period considered here is roughly 1967-1973. We will be citing the strips as they appeared in *Confirmado*, a magazine from Argentina which reprinted the work of Feiffer in these years. We were able to ascertain, as detailed in Gandolfo, 2015, that the strips were reprinted there only two weeks after they had been published in *The Village Voice*. The phrases cited have been translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Film is very important in Feiffer’s universe. Either as a source of dreams, protagonists of his strips or as a source of iconography and narrative tropes that can be deployed to ironic or sarcastic effect. As a child in Brooklyn he grew up with the movies as much as with the comics and, as we shall see in the third part of this paper, eventually managed to work in the production of it.

<sup>8</sup> There is another recurring character in the strip that represents a curious case: The Dancer. The Dancer is a woman who acts out, with each New Year and season, a dance dedicated to the moment in question. Feiffer uses this character as a mouthpiece in which he mixes the verbal component of the strip with the graphic one. The Dancer’s shows are pantomimes which theatricalize the political and social circumstances and which are often infected with pessimism. She does not make feminist charged statements but nevertheless is a woman, an independent one at that, with her own abilities and rich interior world.

<sup>9</sup> After *Little Murders*, based on a play that only got seven performances, directed by Alan Arkin and which also premiered in 1971.

<sup>10</sup> De Beauvoir echoed these sentiments with similar terms: “*for man she is an amusement, a pleasure, company, an inessential boon*” (de Beauvoir, 1956, 678).

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to juxtapose this same point of view to one of Feiffer’s white whales: the figure of the overbearing and guilt inducing Jewish mother. This figure is the protagonist of many a strip and is inspired, mainly, by Feiffer’s own mother, a frustrated artist and fashion designer who was sucked into poverty when she was married, in an arranged marriage facilitated by her family, to a weak husband who never could be the provider figure in the family and could never hold a steady job. Feiffer has said, about her: “*She would have been most happy with a career and friendships and no sex life and no children (...) instead of being in poverty for most of her mature years and embittered and alienated from her children (...) And she was a woman of considerable charm and gifts and talent, but she was fucked over by the culture and by her own inability to defy it*” (Groth, 1988, 94).

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