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7. Conclusion: Textual Contraception

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Conclusion

Textual Contraception

> It follows, if literature is the voice of life, that modern literature will direct an overwhelming amount of its effort toward sexual freedom of speech. Certainly modern literature is doing just that.
>
> —Pangborn, "The Probation in Literature," *Birth Control Review,* January 1929: 13

"American medicine Accepts Birth Control" announced a headline in the 1937 *Birth Control Review,* celebrating the American Medical Association's official recognition of contraception as "as a legitimate part of medical practice" on June 8 (1). This begrudging approval came only after growing support in the media and general public and legal success with the 1936 *United States v. One Package* decision, in which a federal appeals court ruled that doctors could prescribe contraceptives at their discretion. Margaret Sanger had won a victory, albeit a limited one compared to her original goals in *The Woman Rebel.* Birth control was no longer radical, and in 1938 the once scattered factions merged to become the Birth Control Federation of America, which four years later changed its name to the more familiar Planned Parenthood Federation of America (Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women* 242). According to a 1944 survey, three-quarters of physicians trained after 1937 were instructed in contraceptive methods, a substantial increase from the 10 percent receiving this training before 1920 (Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power* 135). By the time World War II loomed on the American horizon, the move away from feminist and leftist ideals was complete, and contraception was an issue of family planning, ensconced within marriage and

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prescribed by a physician.

In 1932 Dr. Hannah M. Stone, birth control activist and clinic director, wrote in the *Review* of a great change in American attitudes toward birth control: "The cumulative effect of the various social, economic, educational and scientific forces on birth control thought is now becoming manifest, and a significant change is taking place in the attitude of the public, the church and the medical professional" ("Birth Control in America" 188). Recent scholars such as Katrina Irving have speculated that the shift to a consumer-based economy, which "valorized spending, enjoined the satisfaction of ever-expanding material desires, and encouraged indulgence in leisure pursuits and other nonessential commodities," accommodated the acceptance of birth control (55–56). This work's previous chapters have demonstrated that American writers engaged with shifting social values and contributed to this changing social acceptance. This modern American literature thus fulfills the function described by Charles Glicksberg: "Literature, prophetic or rebellious in its insights, is often a harbinger of values that are only gradually and reluctantly accepted by society at large" (9). As a rhetorical force permeating public consciousness, fiction contributed to public attitudes, using economics, traditional views of marriage and motherhood, and scientific eugenic thought to rewrite contraception's role. This gradual liberation of sexual discussion corresponded to new forms of writing: as birth control allowed women to rewrite the biological narratives of their lives, adding diversity to the imperative of virginity—marriage—sexuality—motherhood, American authors found a new liberation to "write beyond the ending" of genre conventions.[1] These texts are "contraceptive" in their disruption and rewriting of the traditional biological plot, interrupting the generic plots of fiction that tend to repeat marriage and motherhood as the most plausible roles for women.

By 1945, the birth control movement had spawned more than eight hundred clinics across the nation, and in the 1950s Gregory Pincus, a scientist in the field of sex hormones, began to research hormonal efficacy as a contraceptive. Social attitudes toward birth control have changed significantly since Sanger's day, as has legislation. In *Griswold v.*

1. Rachel Blau DuPlessis coined the phrase "writing beyond the ending." She writes, "It is the project of twentieth-century women writers to solve the contradictions between love and quest and to replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth-century life and letters by offering a different set of choices. They invent a complex of narrative acts with psychosocial meanings, which will be studied here as 'writing beyond the ending'" (*Writing beyond the Ending* 4).

FIGURE 14. "I'll need to see a marriage license," *Ms.*, Summer 2005: 31. Reprinted with permission by the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association.

Connecticut (1965), the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a Connecticut statute prohibiting contraception on the grounds that it violated the right to marital privacy.[2] Seven years later, the court extended this right to the unmarried in *Eisenstadt v. Baird,* invalidating a law that prohibited the distribution of contraceptives to the unwed. The issue of privacy in reproductive decisions came into play again in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Although the Supreme Court has heard numerous cases regarding abortion since 1973, contraception itself seems to have escaped further legal battles. This right is not guaranteed, however, as the National Family Planning

2. For a comprehensive discussion of *Griswold v. Connecticut*, see John W. Johnson.

and Reproductive Health Association acknowledges in a recent advertisement warning that "a powerful minority wants to turn back the clock on reproductive rights" (fig. 14).

Just as women have always fought to control their bodies, citizens have disagreed about reproductive control. The original movement to make birth control legal and available has been won, but many battles remain: consider the recent cases of health insurance coverage and FDA approval for Plan B. The relationship between American fiction and birth control discourse did not end after the acceptance of contraception by the American Medical Association in 1937, or the American entrance into World War II, or any other arbitrary date. American writers have continued to write about contraception and its effects on women's lives. To conclude, this chapter will consider several texts published after the heyday of the birth control movement and address the continued legacy of textual contraception.

In her 1942 best seller, *The Prodigal Women,* Nancy Hale rewrites the old story of a woman using her sexuality to gain the security of marriage and of a freewheeling man "tricked" into an unwelcome commitment. When Maizie becomes pregnant by her wealthy beau, their vastly different visions of the relationship become clear. The novel reveals the continued privileging of marriage despite ideological shifts regarding women. Maizie demonstrates this tension as she practices unwed sex but falls back on the "old pattern" unconsciously "put in her mouth" as the expected response of a "good" girl in the face of pregnancy. Accused of trying to trap Lambert, Maizie replies, "I couldn't help this happening to me" (Hale 72). She apparently had no recourse to birth control and no control over her body. The young lovers are left with few options: Maizie's public disgrace, the social sanction of marriage, or Lambert's suggestion of abortion. "I know a man that knows. . . . It isn't such an awful thing, you know," he said. "Other women have done it" (72). This beginning, fraught with distrust and disagreement, predicates a disastrous marriage filled with psychological abuse and the ruin of Maizie's emotional and physical health. The exchange reveals the tension between love and marriage, sex and reproduction that continued well beyond the legalization of birth control.

Herself married three times, Hale depicts three women and their disastrous marriages in *The Prodigal Women.* Maizie endures an emotionally abusive marriage to her artist husband; Betsy, a "New Woman" experimenting with relationships, engaging in premarital sex and "open marriage," finds herself in an abusive second marriage; and Leda marries for money and never finds love. None of these women are sexually fulfilled

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or successful in marriage. While Maizie and Betsy degrade themselves to their abusive husbands, Leda finds herself estranged from her only son. How is birth control implicated in this dynamic? In her depictions of female sexuality, Hale implies, for Betsy and Leda at least, a level of contraceptive knowledge. The first mention of birth control occurs when Betsy loses her virginity:

> "Look, do you know what to do?"
> "No."
> "God."
> They drove back into town and stopped at an all-night drugstore. . . .
> Nothing untoward came of that night. (350)

Throughout the novel Betsy gains additional knowledge, obliquely revealing her sexual development to her family in the riddle

> There was an old woman who lived in a shoe
> And had so many children she didn't know what to do
> But there was a young woman who lived in a shoe,
> And she didn't have any children, for she knew what to do. (379)

"—that'll be me, if I ever get married!" Betsy declares into the shocked silence. Nancy Hale inscribes female characters using birth control into public discourse, challenging a previous narration of absence. Such an open discussion of contraception, female sexuality, and marriage demonstrates shifting literary standards and a growing public discussion not possible thirty years earlier.

Maizie, the character with no contraceptive knowledge, becomes pregnant, marries, and then succumbs to her husband's coercion and has an abortion. Maizie is adamantly against abortion, saying, "I'd rather die than do that, go to one of those people" (72) but finally agrees to the abortion while they are traveling in South America on their honeymoon. She experiences a series of complications leading to a second operation, regular diathermy treatments, constant pain and weakness, and then a nervous breakdown. While Hale depicts the dangers of abortion through Maizie's experience, she also shows a safe abortion when Betsy undergoes the procedure: "Willy found out the name of a doctor, and one cold morning in January they had driven through the snowy stretches of Central Park, in a taxi, to an address far up in Manhattan, where the doctor had operated on Betsy" (434). The point of Hale's critique is not abortion itself but how female sexuality and fertility act as a battle line

in unhealthy relationships. The reader is left to wonder how cheap and accessible birth control would change these women's experience.

Inserting the Diaphragm

RE-WRITING THE ROMANCE

As birth control became more socially acceptable and a new sexual explicitness entered fiction, authors such as Mary McCarthy and Philip Roth added specific references to contraception as an integral factor in modern sex, particularly in unmarried sexuality.[3] McCarthy's 1954 story "Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself" and Roth's 1959 novella "Goodbye, Columbus" center on sex and the diaphragm, at the time the most popular form of birth control. Both narratives offer insightful answers to the question, what are the effects of contraceptive technology on romance?

McCarthy's texts and Roth's novella can be read as examples of the rhetorical function of fiction, educating and influencing readers about birth control, and as artifacts of cultural memory, reenacting history. Both authors use synecdoche, referencing Sanger to stand in for all of birth control, and write against the literary genre of romance to explore the role of technology in modern relationships. Their focus on the increasingly public role of contraceptive technology in heterosexual romance relocates the female as both subject and object of birth control. Their narrative rendering of this technology provides fictional evidence to the claims of recent feminist critics who argue that reproductive technology simultaneously oppresses and frees women. As Adele Clarke has shown, reproductive science is grounded in an ideology of control: control over materials, over bodies, and over life itself. In their fictional depiction of birth control, McCarthy and Roth reveal the contradictions of control with the diaphragm acting as what Foucault called "disciplinary technology" (Rabinow 17). On the literary level, the presence of the diaphragm disciplines the texts by limiting their romantic potential.

According to Gillian Beer, the traditional romance invokes the past

3. Perhaps because of their foray into "shocking sex," these two works also share public acclaim and were made into movies. Scholarly attention to Roth far outweighs that paid to McCarthy, although no critic focuses on the role of birth control but instead tend to examine their use of humor, their work as autobiography, and their role as ethnic writers. Both the 1964 movie version of *The Group* and the 1969 Paramount version of *Goodbye, Columbus* received mixed reviews and never reached the popularity of the texts. See Kael.

to present a story of courtly and sexual love concerned with the ideal. Although written to entertain, these texts are also implicitly instructive (2–3, 9). Beer differentiates the romance genre from modern romance novels, which she characterizes as "subliterature . . . lightweight commercial fiction deliberately written to flatter daydreams" (1). According to DuPlessis, the romance uses "conjugal love as a telos and the developing heterosexual love relation as a major, if not the only major, element in organizing the narrative action" (*Writing beyond the Ending* 200). However, in her study of the modern romance novel, Janice Radway argues that these texts serve an important psychological function for their female readers. The popular romance is characterized by a heterosexual relationship developing into marriage and features romantic and passionate sex, a dashing hero, and a happy ending. Both McCarthy and Roth write within and against these romance conventions. They invoke a past that is less than ideal to instruct readers on birth control method and its role in relationships. Their failed romances could be described with this pitch: "imagine what could happen when you send modern romance on a blind date with contraceptive technology."

"Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself" originally appeared in the *Partisan Review* in 1954 and ultimately appeared with minor revisions as chapter 3 of McCarthy's controversial 1963 best seller, *The Group*. According to Frances Kiernan, "the story of Dottie's getting herself fitted for a diaphragm created a sensation" (510). This controversy was the result of McCarthy's explicit and humorous approach to what most perceived as a private medical matter. McCarthy sets her story in the past, focusing on a group of (white) 1933 Vassar graduates, thus situating her characters in the midst of the American birth control movement. By 1933, Sanger's American Birth Control League had opened birth control clinics across the nation, and the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control was feverishly lobbying for repeal of the Comstock Act. Setting her story in an earlier period, McCarthy corresponds to the romance convention of invoking the past. However, she reveals the depths of uncertain sexual relations beneath the nostalgic veneer of the New Woman's liberation. "Dottie" is more than simply a nostalgic or didactic rewriting of history because it reveals the fear of pregnancy that remained a common thread in women's lives even as McCarthy was writing.

Published just a few years after the Pill won FDA approval, the novel capitalizes on more relaxed attitudes towards birth control to depict an era of controversy over contraception. *The Group* and "Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself" contain a much franker, more explicit discus-

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sion of birth control than works of earlier American writers such as Djuna Barnes, Agnes Smedley, and Theodore Dreiser, who were themselves constrained by the same Comstock Act that made the dissemination of contraceptive information illegal. Writing almost half a century later, McCarthy and Roth enjoyed a greater freedom to discuss contraception explicitly and humorously. By setting her story and novel in 1933, McCarthy revisits a time when she would not have been able to write so openly and in so much detail about birth control. This work demonstrates the complexities of inserting realistic contraception into heterosexual romance.[4]

The morning after losing her virginity, Dottie is commanded by her new lover to "[g]et yourself a pessary" (34). Dottie originally mistakes "pessary" for "peccary," "a coarse, piglike mammal" she had studied in zoology (34). This humorous mistake hints at Dottie's innocence and her romantic tendencies. Her confusion of the natural and technological reveals an ideological grounding in the premise that sex is "natural" and human relationships are animalistic in their simplicity. Dick clarifies his order by redefining his term, much to the relief of Dottie and the reader, with the modifiers "[a] female contraceptive, a plug. . . . You get it from a lady doctor" (34). Dick's specification of a "lady doctor" is wonderfully vague and could be read as a female physician (such as those who often staffed birth control clinics, like the "white-coated, olive-skinned woman with a big bun of black hair" that Dottie sees) or a male physician specializing in "lady's problems," a gynecologist (49).

To further distinguish between a peccary and a pessary, Dottie goes to a birth control clinic for information. Birth control clinics were spreading across the nation during the 1930s: in 1930, there were 31 clinics; in 1935, 150; and by 1936, nearly 250.[5] Here Dottie obtained

4. Differences between the *Partisan Review* story and chapter 3 of *The Group* are minor, especially in terms of the discussion of the diaphragm. Some names are changed (Harald in the novel is John in the story, for example), and the novel expands upon the story. Since Roth's 1959 novella references the 1954 "How Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself," I refer to quotes and page numbers from the *Partisan Review* story unless otherwise indicated.

While McCarthy enjoyed more freedom than Dreiser and earlier writers, this was not without its repercussions. The *Partisan Review* editors "were prepared to print the pessary story and run the risk of coming up against the postal authorities" (Kiernan 357). While *The Group* was an immediate public success, critics faulted the book as being too "trivial" in its detail, a symptom of "the profound materiality of women" (Mailer), lacking in focus, and not coming together as a novel. See Bennett and Hochmann for annotated reviews. The novel was banned for obscenity in Ireland, Australia, and Italy, "thanks largely to the chapters about Dottie Renfrew" (Brightman 486).

5. Clinic numbers taken from "Birth Control Centers in the United States." See also "One Hundred Contraceptive Clinics" for demographic and attendance data.

"a doctor's name and a sheaf of pamphlets that described a myriad of devices—tampons, sponges, collar-button, wishbone, and butterfly pessaries, thimbles, silk rings, and coils—and the virtues and drawbacks of each" (37). Such pamphlets, likely based on Margaret Sanger's "Family Limitation," were often the first (and only) frank, detailed material available for women.[6] The pamphlet described and pictured methods, even telling women where they could obtain materials and how much they were likely to cost. The practicalities of contraception, with its myriad accoutrements, conflict with the ideal notion of romance by foregrounding the base physicality of sex and its possible consequences. While Dottie never seems concerned about pregnancy, Dick's insistence that she be fitted for a diaphragm reveals his practical rather than romantic view of the relationship. Radway argues that the popular romance leads to marriage, but Dick is already married (though separated from his wife) and is careful not to be tied to Dottie through pregnancy. Disqualified as a male romantic hero, he insists on inserting the diaphragm into their relationship.

While attention to detail is a common aspect of the romance genre (Beer 3), McCarthy chooses to detail the history and method of the diaphragm. This technical specificity relocates attention from the developing relationship between Dick and Dottie to the diaphragm itself, which becomes the third player in this "love" triangle. Three days after her clinic visit Dottie and her friend Kay are fitted for a diaphragm pessary, which the bureau had suggested: "The new device recommended to Dottie by the bureau had the backing of the whole U.S. medical profession; it had been found by Margaret Sanger in Holland and was now for the first time being imported in quantity into the U.S.A., where our own manufacturers could copy it. It combined the maximum of protection with the minimum of inconvenience and could be used by any woman of average or better intelligence, following the instructions of a qualified physician" (37). The diaphragm was the method recommended by Sanger and the birth control clinics, due in part to its high effectiveness when used correctly and also because it needed to be fitted, thus keeping women in contact with a clinic.[7] Thus, access to this method was under direct control and supervision of the medical profession. Dottie gains power through her knowledge even as a physician limits her access

6. The pamphlet, originally published in 1914, was revised several times. See Jensen.

7. The percentage of diaphragm users grew in the 1930s, but according to Dawson, Meny, and Ridley, while 71 percent of the educated, white, urban women in their sample used birth control, only 17 percent used the diaphragm. The study surveyed 1,049 white married women of childbearing age during the 1920s and 1930s. The majority of women used condoms, withdrawal, or the rhythm method.

and she submits to physical and psychological surveillance. In educating her reader on the diaphragm's history, still a widely used contraceptive in the 1950s, McCarthy also reveals the forces that regulate its use and the diaphragm's own power over the female body.[8] In an almost documentary fashion, McCarthy details Dottie's experience with birth control rather than the niceties of her relationship with Dick. Indeed, Dottie and Dick's relationship, based on a single night of sex, never really develops and thus does not meet a basic requirement of the romance genre. However, Dottie *does* develop a courtly relationship with the diaphragm. Thus in this triangle Dottie's physical association with contraceptive technology supersedes her emotional attachment to Dick; her location as an object within the medical system seems to foreclose on her becoming an object of patriarchal marriage (the traditional ending of the popular romance).

Viewing her relationship to Dick through traditional romantic lenses, Dottie integrates her new knowledge of birth control into a loving fantasy. In what can be read as an attempt to fulfill the popular romantic conclusion, Dottie envisions the "ring" shape of the diaphragm as wedding her symbolically to Dick. She tells herself "he had sent her here, to be wedded, as it were, by proxy, with the 'ring' or diaphragm pessary that the woman doctor dispensed" (37). Indeed, the story emphasizes the marital status of the woman doctor herself: "the broad gold wedding ring on her hand shone like a talisman, a Hippocratic band" (49). The doctor's wedding band becomes entangled with her ability to prescribe a diaphragm, conflating the gold wedding ring with the ring of the pessary. To Dottie, the symbolic wedding ring transforms her illicit affair into socially sanctioned sex within wedlock. She reads herself as a character in a romance, involved in a developing relationship leading to marriage. But her relationship with Dick violates the basic description set forth by Radway of "a relationship characterized by *mutual* love and by the hero's quite unusual ability to express his devotion gently and with concern for his heroine's pleasure" (70). The clinical tone employed by McCarthy to describe the situation reveals Dottie's fancy for what it is: a naive romanticization of her entry into sexual politics. Dottie's matrimonial fantasy, at odds with her clinical knowledge, reveals yet another layer of control in the social fabric as Dottie unconsciously idealizes traditional marriage and the gendered power relations it entails. Indeed, her brief interactions with Dick already have established her role as one of submission and appeasement.

8. According to Piccinino and Mosher, diaphragm use has decreased in the United States since the 1980s, largely due to concern over preventing HIV and other STDs.

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McCarthy's text is not "implicitly instructive" in the traditional romantic sense of how to find and keep the ideal man. However, the choice of detail does create a text that instructs in almost documentary fashion. In her description of the clinic, and her enumeration of the various contraceptive methods available (including withdrawal, suppositories, condoms, and douching), McCarthy educates her readers about the clinic system and birth control technology. Women used many of these methods in the 1950s and 1960s, and the step-by-step directions on diaphragm insertion could still be followed today. Because of her clinic visit, Dottie knows exactly what will happen when the doctor sees her. Because McCarthy details a diaphragm fitting, in clinical detail, the reader soon knows as well:

> This article, a rubber cap mounted on a coiled spring, came in a range of sizes and would be tried out in Dottie's vagina, for fit, wearing comfort, and so on, in the same way that various lenses were tried out for the eyes. The woman doctor would insert it, and having made sure of the proper size, she would teach Dottie how to put it in, how to smear it with contraceptive jelly and put a dab in the middle, how to crouch in a squatting position, fold the pessary between thumb and forefinger of the right hand, while parting the labia majora with the left hand, and edge the pessary in, so that it would snap into place, shielding the cervix, and finally how to follow it with the right middle finger, locate the cervix or soft neck of the uterus and make certain it was covered by rubber. (37–38)

Dottie would then be taught how to douche and how to care for all her equipment. The technical detail, which could have been excerpted from a medical textbook, contrasts with Dottie's matrimonial vision of the diaphragm. Dottie herself is the object of this scene as much as the diaphragm is: she herself could be inserted into a textbook.

This disparity between Dottie's romantic vision and the clinical contraceptive details emphasizes the gulf between scientific aspects of contraception and how American society shapes the deployment of this knowledge. The diaphragm's physical presence could not be reconciled with passionate visions of carefree love. As the diaphragm embodies the potential to separate sex from marriage and women from reproduction, society reinscribes matrimonial ideals to contain this threat. The diaphragm's prominence signifies the failure of Dottie's romance. Radway refers obliquely to this possibility in her discussion of failed romance novels: "When another text portrays a heroine who is neither harmed nor disturbed by her ability to have sex with several men, I suspect it is

classified as 'bad' because it makes explicit the threatening implications of an unleashed feminine sexuality capable of satisfying itself outside the structures of patriarchal domination that are still perpetuated most effectively through marriage" (74). Because birth control offers the potential for expressing female sexuality outside of marriage, it complicates the traditional trajectory of romance and exemplifies the tensions of the contraceptive text. The conflict inherent in Dottie's romanticism and McCarthy's choice of detail foregrounds the idea that the sexual freedom inherent in birth control is always tempered by cultural context. In the 1930s and the 1950s, the female body is subject to moral codes that mandate marriage.

The conflict between Dottie's romantic vision and the stark reality of the diaphragm fitting create a humorous tone. Reading Dottie as developing a relationship with the diaphragm, rather than with Dick, creates the sense of a tragicomedy of misunderstanding, mistaken identity, and physical humor. For instance, Dottie's original misunderstanding of "peccary" for "pessary" was a bit of harmless absurdity. Her supervised attempt to insert her newly fitted diaphragm adds a note of physical farce: "As she was trying to fold the pessary, the slippery thing, all covered with jelly, jumped out of her grasp and shot across the room and hit the sterilizer. Dottie could have died" (73). More tragic in its result are the cases of mistaken identity: Dottie mistakes her own identity as love interest to Dick, and Dick's identity as a romantic hero. She also misreads the diaphragm as a minor object in the normal course of natural love rather than as a subject, a silent third partner, in the relationship.

The accumulation of technological detail forcing a reconsideration of male/female relations undermines Dottie's construction of herself as a "natural," romantic subject. As Dawn Trouard has noted, McCarthy provides "complete instructions on inserting a pessary. . . . By the time Dottie has been fitted, the reader knows that McCarthy knows that there are at least nine designs in diaphragms and that she knows all the Latin terms for female anatomy" (106). Trouard argues that this attention to detail is a part of McCarthy's satiric elitism.[9] However, when read simultaneously in the context of the period it was created and the period it represents, McCarthy's display of knowledge acts as more than either satire or elitism. In addition to the technical information of how to insert

9. Trouard argues that "McCarthy appears magisterial and smugly resolute as a defense against uncertainties that plague her values," and that "[t]he elitist vacillation combined with an assertive need to glorify and destroy characters, in the same sentence, stems from a dilemma rooted in McCarthy's own life concerning peer group standards" (98, 101).

a diaphragm, McCarthy also describes the social context of its usage. This technology is at once liberating and restrictive, contingent upon the subject position of woman as married/unmarried, rich/poor, fit/unfit.

Social forces that considered marital status, morality, and class in the equation determining contraceptive access contained women's reproductive freedom. As a well-to-do woman, Dottie could find a sympathetic doctor willing to prescribe a pessary for "female troubles." As Dottie tells her friend Kay, birth control is "legal and aboveboard, thanks to a court decision that allowed doctors to prescribe contraceptives for the prevention or cure of disease" (42).[10] Through the character Kay we get a glimpse of the social significance of Dottie's brazen act.[11] Kay is horrified that, as an unmarried woman, Dottie made the appointment in her own name, when "the office might be raided and the doctor's records impounded and published in the papers, which would be terrible for Dottie's family" (42).[12] McCarthy might be referring to the 1929 raid on the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in which authorities seized private medical records. Such public advertisement of illicit sexuality would destroy the reputation of a respectable, well-to-do girl and ruin her prospects for an advantageous marriage. Kay represents social hypocrisy and the double standard of sexuality: although she herself had sex before marriage, she believes "[o]nce a [single] girl got a pessary, it cheapened her" (41). Even the practical Kay indicates that sex out of wedlock is acceptable as long as it is not technologically controlled. That is, the diaphragm takes the risk and romance out of sex. By writing through the voice of Kay, McCarthy touches on the complex role of birth control in the changing conception of female sexuality, as she adds humor and

10. Dottie is referring to a 1919 New York decision that allowed doctors to prescribe birth control only to prevent or cure disease. Not until 1936, in the *United States v. One Package* decision, were doctors legally allowed to prescribe contraception for contraceptive purposes.

11. McCarthy discusses her use of different narrative voices in "Letter to a Translator about *The Group*." In "Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself" and chapter 3 of *The Group* there are three main strands: Dottie's idealistic voice, Kay's cynical voice, and the instructional voice in which Dottie relays her birth control knowledge. McCarthy writes, "The *style indirect libre* makes it possible for each girl to be heard *in her own words*. Yet out of this an irony develops. This is that her own words, in most cases, are everybody's words—clichés pronounced with an air of originality" (74).

12. Interestingly, McCarthy changed this phrasing in the novel to "would *kill* Dottie's family" (64). This hyperbole more clearly indicates that the narrative is in Kay's voice here by referring to her concern for social acceptance. Kay's practicality and concern for material goods contrast with Dottie's idealism throughout the story. Dottie even envisions a future as a birth control advocate: "In the back of Dottie's mind was a plan, not yet fully matured, of coming to New York and working as a volunteer for the birth-control people" (48).

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texture to the narrative.

Kay plays a central role in recasting the romance by narrating a section on the "Etiquette of Contraception," which effectively pays homage to the frequent reality of sex outside of marriage. By detailing the implicit power of the diaphragm to enable illicit sexuality and therefore undermine marriage, McCarthy violates another convention of popular romance: a strong stance against "bed hopping" and multiple sexual partners. Her husband tells Kay, who had introduced Dick and Dottie, that this contraceptive etiquette is "well understood by all the young men of his acquaintance" (39). Kay therefore reads Dick's request to Dottie as confirmation that he is serious about the relationship: "If it were only a casual affair, he would feel himself bound to use condoms or practice coitus interruptus. The expense was a determining factor: no gentleman would expect a girl to put up the doctor's fee, plus the price of the pessary and the jelly and the douche-bag, if he were not going to sleep with her long enough for her to recover her investment" (39). Kay's terms are those of exchange and investment, indicating that she understands the true foundation of the relationship and is without Dottie's romantic notions of love and marriage. Courtship and romance, then, are firmly grounded within a consumer economy of supply and demand, investment and profit. The physical presence of the diaphragm foregrounds this expense as a reminder of the manufactured goods bought in the sexual marketplace. Kay goes on to detail the arrangements for who keeps the diaphragm in affairs, the possibility of discovery, and the problem of disposal. In all, McCarthy presents what Joseph Epstein calls a "sociology of the diaphragm" that satirizes sexual relations while revealing how power flows among men and women, married and unmarried (45).

Although Dottie occupies a powerful position as white, upper-middle class, and educated, her unmarried status still restricts her possession of birth control. The unromantic resolution emphasizes Dottie's precarious position, demonstrating the social constraints on female sexuality despite access to the technology. After going through her exam and fitting, Dottie never uses the new diaphragm, jelly, fountain syringe, or douche bag. Leaving the doctor's office, she calls her lover but is unable to reach him. The bag begins to represent risk rather than promise, and Dottie realizes that she does not control her sexuality: Dick does. She bought the diaphragm at his command and its presence now binds her to him: "She had no wish ever to see Dick again, but the possession of all this machinery left her no choice. . . . She had nowhere to go but Dick's" (52). The story ends with Dottie alone on a park bench, not with the traditional romantic conclusion of a happily married couple.

How, then, does Dottie "make an honest woman of herself?" Does the pessary make her honest, or does this title refer to what happens beyond the scope of the story, after she leaves the park bench? The novel adds to this ending in interesting ways. In chapter 3 of *The Group,* Dottie waits in Washington Park for several hours before leaving her bulky bag of contraceptives under a bench and walking off alone. Why would Dottie abandon the promise of sexual freedom in that nondescript brown paper bag? Without a real wedding ring on her finger, Dottie has no place to keep her symbolic ring. Even sitting alone in Washington Square in the growing dark makes Dottie's sexual status questionable: she is accosted by strange men and "a policeman had stared at her curiously" (76). Dottie's interpellation as a "loose woman" reinforces the message that the diaphragm cannot bestow sexual power as long as she remains socially marked by her marital status. "Cheapened" by her possession of the diaphragm, she "makes an honest woman of herself" by leaving it behind. In the novel, this experience leads to a nervous breakdown, and Dottie conforms to social stereotypes of womanhood by becoming engaged to a man she doesn't love. Thus, the story is not only a failed romance but a failed contraceptive text that cannot, to use DuPlessis's phrase, "write beyond the ending" of marriage.

While Dottie falls in love with the married man who seduces her, Kay thinks in practical terms of material gains and reputations lost. Her consumer mentality and quest for upward mobility complement the economic mechanism of control over female access to birth control. Dottie's desire to experience a love affair was quite common, according to an "Unofficial Questionnaire" of college women published in the 1930 *Birth Control Review.* However, she did not represent the average birth control clinic demographic. A study of 100 representative contraceptive centers in 1936 revealed that the average woman instructed in birth control clinics was "28 years old with three living children; in poor circumstances or receiving public relief" ("One Hundred Contraceptive Clinics" 3). Dottie views birth control as a right, a symbolic marriage, but as I've shown, during the 1930s it was a discourse of economics and eugenics that helped birth control gain social acceptance. McCarthy points to this tension by contrasting Dottie and Kay to the surrounding doctor's office: "On the walls were etchings showing overcrowded slums teeming with rickety children and a lithograph of an early hospital ward in which untended young women, with babies at their side, were dying, presumably of puerperal fever" (42). The description of these pictures corresponds with much of the artwork found in the *Birth Control Review,* which pictured large families in extreme poverty, with dirty, skinny children in the fore-

ground. The message, made explicit by birth control advocates, is that contraception will control the indigent population. While this rhetoric led to a growing public acceptance of birth control, the reality was that women like Dottie and Kay, white middle-class college graduates, were successfully using birth control, leading some to fear a "race suicide" (Robinson 48).

The Group expands on the waiting room scene to further depict how class acts as a mechanism of control. Surrounded by pictures of the poor, Kay silently accuses herself of "'profiteering' on the birth-control crusade. Mentally, she defends herself. Birth control, she argued, was for those who knew how to use it and value it—the educated classes" (69). The nurse further elaborates this class bias, implying that those who need birth control most are too ignorant to follow directions (an attitude that often justified forced sterilization) (73). The attitudes of Kay and the nurse reveal another level of restriction on birth control technology. Despite clinics being opened to serve a poorer population, policy on information dispersal was in the hands of the medical profession and the economically powerful. Birth control was firmly situated in a consumer culture, with the diaphragm a dear commodity. The simple fact of technological progress, of effective contraception, does not guarantee social progress. As she told Elisabeth Niebuhr in a *Paris Review* interview, McCarthy wrote her novel to demonstrate a loss of faith in the idea of progress, including sexual progress, "a deliberate exposure of the fantasy of the educated American woman's freedom" (qtd. in Showalter 345). Neither technology nor education can free women trapped by romantic ideology.

Philip Roth echoed McCarthy in his use of the diaphragm as a focus of young sexuality in "Goodbye, Columbus"; this daring treatment helped his work receive public and critical acclaim, leading to the National Book Award for Fiction. This novella invokes McCarthy as a source of birth control knowledge and follows her lead in using Margaret Sanger as synecdoche for the larger social movement. But an evaluation of the relationship between these texts reveals more than the flip salute of one author to another. The connection acts as much more than the romantic genre convention of recycling plotlines (Beer 3). In his description of the relationship between Neil and Brenda, Roth builds upon McCarthy to examine the role of the diaphragm in romantic and sexual relationships.

Although Roth uses younger characters, both authors focus on an unmarried, well-educated white couple, and both reinscribe a sexual dynamic of male control and place birth control firmly within this relationship. McCarthy's Dottie and Roth's Brenda are fitted for diaphragms

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not on their own motivation, but because their lovers tell them to. Dick's command to "Get yourself a pessary" reminds Dottie of Hamlet's order to Ophelia to "Get thee to a nunnery" (34). The tone of mandate and the sentence structure are not the only echoes here. Janet Adelman has interpreted Hamlet's "task as the disruption of marriage itself," his relationship with Ophelia tainted with a misogyny caused by his mother's sexual behavior (14). Indeed, Hamlet's command is contraceptive in implication, followed as it is by the question "Why, wouldst though be a breeder of sinners?" (3.1.121). Relocating Ophelia to a nunnery removes her from the cycle of romance, sex, and reproduction. Dick and later Neil use the diaphragm to remove the threat of breeding from their sexual liaisons.

Dick's command also echoes Hamlet's in its reproduction of gendered power relations that assume male control over the female body. Like Dick, Roth's Neil introduces the diaphragm into his relationship with Brenda. Although he is less immediately commanding than Dick, Neil resorts to mandate when persuasion fails. The following conversation is a textbook case of rhetorical manipulation. Neil first expresses his desire and then uses the logical argument of effectiveness against pregnancy:

> "I know this is out of the blue, though really it's not. . . . I want you to buy a diaphragm. To go to a doctor and get one."
>
> She smiled. "Don't worry, sweetie, we're careful. Everything is okay."
>
> "But that's the safest."
>
> "We're safe. It'd be a waste." (Roth 79)

The appeal to safety is meant to resonate with female fears of pregnancy. But Brenda is unaffected and indeed seems unconcerned with possible pregnancy. She counters Neil's argument with her own reassurance of safety and call for economy, indicating satisfaction with their previous method (most likely withdrawal or condoms). When Brenda rejects both arguments, Neil takes a new path, arguing for his own sexual pleasure:

> "Brenda, I want you to own one for . . . for the sake of pleasure."
>
> "Pleasure? Whose? The doctor's?"
>
> "Mine," I said. (79)

Neil's concern for his own pleasure rather than Brenda's makes him unfit to play the role of romantic hero. When Brenda resists this argument, he calls her selfish and then resorts to command: "I'm bothering just because I want you to go to a doctor and get a diaphragm. That's all. No explanation. Just do it. Do it because I asked you to" (81). The command

to "Just do it" reveals that, to Neil, Brenda should need no other reason but the fact that he has told her to. Men command women, and they command their sexual choices. As Alan France notes, the diaphragm is a symbol of Neil's larger attempts to impose his will upon the relationship and retain control (87). Neil's multiple, unsatisfactory reasons may hide a deeper motive, a resistance to the marriage that would likely result if Brenda became pregnant. Both Dick and Neil are unfit for marriage and thus unfit to play the role of romantic hero. While the command of Dick and Neil to buy a diaphragm is the sexual opposite of taking up residence in a nunnery, both imply female passivity and a lack of bodily control.

Seemingly unconcerned about pregnancy, both Dottie and Brenda are physically examined and fitted for the diaphragm at the command of a man. The diaphragm is the responsibility of the female partner with no outward signs to the male that it is in use. Birth control as the women's responsibility upholds normative ideologies of the female as reproductive body, responsible for her fertility and for any results, at the same time that it potentially undermines the idea of female sexual passivity. As technology offers the potential for women to control their reproduction, it enters the power structure as a tool for men to control women. The diaphragm's insertion into the relationship foregrounds the gender relations inherent in popular romance, which constructs "a particular kind of female self, the self-in-relation" to the male (Radway 147). In its effect, in these novels the diaphragm becomes another mechanism of emotional and physical control.

For McCarthy and Roth, the diaphragm acts to discipline the female body in the modern romance, embodying the intersection of technology and sexuality. They use the literary device synecdoche to demonstrate how technology became inserted into cultural discourse. As in McCarthy, the name of Margaret Sanger stands in for birth control and the entire clinic system. Neil tells Brenda, "You can go to Margaret Sanger, in New York. They don't ask questions" (82). Read literally, this sounds as though Brenda will knock on the door of Sanger's personal residence and request a diaphragm. Brenda also uses this figure of speech, telling Neil, "I called Margaret Sanger Clinic" (97). The lack of a "the" or "'s" elides the difference between the individual, Margaret Sanger, and the clinic system. It is not *the* clinic named for Sanger, or Sanger's clinic: the individual and the structure are one and the same. Ironically, Sanger fought to put birth control into the hands of physicians rather than directly into the hands of women. Invoking birth control in the name of Sanger directly references the conservative ideology of contraceptives as belonging to the realm of science and medicine.

Roth reveals his debt to "Dottie" by using McCarthy's name as synecdoche for illicit birth control knowledge. When an indignant Brenda asks Neil if he has "done this before," Neil replies, "I just know. I read Mary McCarthy" (82). To read "Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself" is to gain an essential education in how to find and use birth control. It also stands in, however, for doing so under questionable terms. Brenda replies to Neil, "That's exactly right. That's just what I'd feel like, somebody out of *her*" (82). This comment reveals an interesting anachronism: while McCarthy depicted women in 1933, she was really writing about women in the 1950s. The social code of morality regarding unmarried women, sexuality, and reproduction was still largely operative. Dottie inhabits cultural memory for her possession of the diaphragm and her romantic failure. This identification of McCarthy with illicit sex is made again when Brenda and Neil register at a Boston hotel as a married couple. Indeed, the earlier conversation is repeated almost verbatim, but with the speakers reversed:

> "Have you done this before?" I [Neil] said.
> "I read Mary McCarthy." (125)

Unmarried sexuality, birth control, the diaphragm, Margaret Sanger, and Mary McCarthy become synonymous in Roth's novella and in the larger cultural discourse. Each references a narrative that questions notions of fulfilled romance through female sexuality. This intertextual re-invocation rewrites birth control as antithetical to female autonomy.

Another intertextual echo is the symbolic significance of the diaphragm, its indication of a serious relationship akin to marriage. Roth twists McCarthy's use of this trope, as the male character Neil sees the diaphragm, like Dottie, as a kind of marriage. He waits for Brenda in St. Patrick's Cathedral, conveniently across the street from the "posh gynecologist," and thinks, "Now the doctor is about to wed Brenda to me" (100). Neil's location trying to pray in a Catholic Cathedral, when he is himself Jewish, points to the dissonance between Neil's thoughts of marriage and his relationship to Brenda. In a socially sanctioned wedding bride and groom would be together awaiting public declaration of their legal status as husband and wife. The matrimony of the diaphragm is one of secrecy, separation, and sex. This is further made clear by the continuation of Neil's thought: "and I am not entirely certain this is all for the best" (100). Neil lacks Dottie's naive romanticization of sex as marriage but rather dreads the implications of this secret nuptial.

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Unlike Dottie, Brenda leaves the doctor's office carrying nothing, "like a woman who's only been window shopping" (101). Neil's brief vision of Brenda as a wealthy cosmopolitan consumer is, indeed, not at all dissonant with her purpose. Brenda's ability to be fitted for the diaphragm is, like Dottie's in 1933, in large part a result of her wealth. The location of the gynecologist's office across from Bergdorf Goodman's emphasizes this consumer power. Indeed, shopping was the motive given for the trip from Newark to New York, and the doctor's location in an upscale commercial district "was a perfect place for Brenda to add to her wardrobe" (99). Neil compares Brenda to the idle female consumer, and the gynecologist's remark—"shall I wrap it or will you take it with you?"—parallels the words of countless shop girls. Although Brenda is empty-handed, she is not empty, but leaves the office wearing the new diaphragm. With no physical evidence of her successful birth control foray, Brenda is able to escape the interpellation that Dottie's brown bag forces upon her.

Brenda and Dottie represent one last controlling power on female sexuality: parental control. While Dottie has a less hostile relationship with her mother, both she and Brenda are largely influenced by what their parents, especially mothers, will think about their sexual behavior. When Brenda returns to Radcliffe, she leaves her diaphragm at home. Her mother finds it in a drawer in Brenda's bedroom, revealing the secret sexual nature of Neil and Brenda's relationship to her parents. According to her mother, the realization of their daughter's active sexuality, embodied by the diaphragm, has "broken her parents' hearts" (129). Barbara Frey Waxman reads Brenda as consciously leaving the diaphragm in order to end her relationship with Neil and "retreat to the safety of childhood's maternal protection" (101). However, this position does not consider Brenda's continual ambivalence towards the device. She never wanted the diaphragm and repeatedly indicates that her relationship is more meaningful if risky. Therefore, her decision to leave the diaphragm at home may be read as an attempt to rekindle the romance with Neil. Both Dottie and Brenda are adults, college age or older, and yet both are still controlled psychologically by their parents. As women, they are sexually children until handed from parent to husband. Their "modern" freedom as sexual beings is limited, despite the ability to escape pregnancy, by the disciplining force of guilt. The diaphragm marks them as wayward children, as "bad girls" rather than "honest women."

McCarthy and Roth play with literary genre and device to explore the serious intersection of contraceptive technology and heterosexual relationships. While the tone employed by McCarthy and Roth is

humorous, the texts act to transmit technological information about the diaphragm and its role in controlling the female body. Indeed, other literary works have mentioned McCarthy as providing them with their first information about contraception. In Wendy Wasserstein's 1978 play, *Uncommon Women and Others*, the character Leilah reveals, "Do you know the first time I ever really understood about diaphragms or sex was from reading *The Group*. I remember when I was twelve taking it down from my parents' library shelf and rereading the passages about Dottie leaving her diaphragm on Washington Square" (28). As best sellers, the works of McCarthy and Roth contributed to a social conversation about sexuality and contraception at the same time that they complicated ideas about modern intimacy. Foregrounding contraception within sexuality, and sexuality within relationships, results in a reconsideration of courtship, romance, and marriage. Centered upon the contradictions inherent in birth control, these texts reinscribe troublesome assumptions about female sexual passivity even as they open space for the liberating power of contraception.

Conclusions

Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, based on her earlier letters, notebooks, and plays and published after her death at age thirty-five, demonstrates the continuing evolution of birth control in women's lives and in texts. Hansberry was born in 1930, and her realist plays contributed to the discussion of civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.[13] Act I, Sequence 5 of the play corresponds with Hansberry's experience as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin. The character Candace represents Hansberry, an African American student with passionate political beliefs. When her friend Mariela announces that she is pregnant, a shocked Candace asks, "Doesn't he *wear* anything? Don't *you*?" (46). Candace clearly assumes that nonmarital sex is common at the university and that women protect themselves from pregnancy with birth control. This sexual freedom should be the right of women as well as men, Candace later argues with Monasse, a student from Ethiopia. "And *you* call yourself a revolutionary! (*He opens his mouth to speak—stammers—looks in vain for the referee.*) Well, I'll bet you at least one-half of the girls on this campus have them—diaphragms—and use them! And it's growing all the time—and, well, when the pill comes in, well . . . *all*

13. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* was produced in 1969 and published in 1971.

the excuses will be over then! Women will be exactly as free as men" (48). Candace equates contraception with female sexuality, and the expression of female sexuality with equality between men and women. Birth control is an assumed right for this revolutionary African American woman. By attacking the sexual double standard and the code of silence (Monasse does not want to discuss birth control "with a young woman I respect" [48]), Candace prefigures the growing public conversation about contraception and its role in women's lives. Unfortunately, Candace's prophecy that with the birth control pill "women will be exactly as free as men" has proven overly optimistic.

Margaret Sanger wrote in 1920, "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body" (94). However, as Roth, McCarthy, Hansberry, and others depict in fiction and nonfiction, birth control itself exists in a web of social control. Works by American authors intersected with the concerns of the birth control movement, exploring how the issues of economics, morality, female roles, and eugenics structured the reproductive lives of women and fictional narratives. The lens of the birth control movement provides a fascinating perspective for examining how seemingly contradictory arguments are employed to introduce a potentially radical social change so as to stretch, rather than rend, the social fabric. Although birth control was often explicitly absent in the texts, the prominence of contraception in the media and social conversation made that absence a site of exploration of consequence and possibility. The birth control movement shaped not only political debate and social roles in the years between world wars; it also shaped and was shaped by the textual discourse used to promote and subvert the cause.

Birth control enabled the development of the contraceptive text, interrupting the generic plots of fiction that tend to repeat marriage and motherhood as the most plausible roles for women. The failure of these texts to fulfill the true potential of reenvisioning female life-narratives indicates the degree to which the potential of contraception has been and still is limited by ideologies of gendered power. Birth control continues to be deployed in ways that oppress as well as free women, as a tool to reinscribe their sexual status and reproductive destiny. Contraceptive marketing, use, and access still interpellates women within economic and racial boundaries, rather than freeing them to complete control of their bodies. By examining the complex relationship between American literature, the social and political movement for birth control, and medical technology, we gain insight into the ways in which the rhetorical and aesthetic functions of literature merge and act upon public discourse.